

ALL ROBERT SILVERBERG ISSUE

WINTER 1969

No. 13 • ICD • 50c

SCIENCE **F**ICTION **GREATS**

Big New Collection

- **GUARDIAN OF THE CRYSTAL GATE**
- **LOOK HOMEWARD, SPACEMAN**
- **THE HAPPY UNFORTUNATE**
- **O, CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN**
- **THE LUNATIC PLANET**
- **THE BLUE PLAGUE**
- **HOLE IN THE AIR**
- **CALL ME ZOMBIE**
- **VAULT OF THE AGES**



ROBERT SILVERBERG ISSUE

AN EDITORIAL

The summer of 1955 was a hot and dreary one in New York City, setting records every day for temperature and humidity. But in a decrepit apartment house on West 114th Street, in the shadow of Columbia University, an eager, bright-eyed, beardless young man labored tirelessly over a smoking typewriter, turning out science fiction stories night and day with the furious energy of one who has just started to sell fiction regularly, and who is afraid to rest for a moment, lest the spell of success be broken.

That busy young man was Robert Silverberg. He was not the only busy writer in the building at the time, for next door to him lived a certain Randall Garrett, and one flight down dwelled a refugee from Ohio named Harlan Ellison, and they, too, made their typewriters hum. But I look back with awe on Silverberg's exploits of that summer, for I am Robert Silverberg too, older, wearier, no longer beardless, and I wonder how I did it. The 18-hour working days, the feat of writing a complete novel in less than a week, the novella produced between midnight and dawn—these are things I'd scarcely want to attempt, today. Most of the stories in this issue of *SCIENCE FICTION GREATS* were written that sticky, joyous summer, or in the months immediately following—turned out in that early rush of energy. Looking at them now, I can see much that I'd do differently, changes I'd make in plot, style, character development. But such meddling across the timelines is improper. My younger self would have resented it if his stuffy elder self suddenly appeared and began tinkering with his work. Here are eight tales out of the past. Think kindly of them and of that ambitious young man in the humid room, thirteen summers ago.

—Robert Silverberg

ALL ROBERT SILVERBERG ISSUE

SCIENCE FICTION GREATS

GUARDIAN OF THE CRYSTAL GATE	4
THE HAPPY UNFORTUNATE	30
HOLE IN THE AIR	50
LOOK HOMEWARD, SPACEMAN	61
OH CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN	74
THE LUNATIC PLANET	84
CALL ME ZOMBIE	100
VAULT OF THE AGES	111
THE BLUE PLAGUE	119

SCIENCE FICTION GREATS is published quarterly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364 at 50c a copy. Subscription rates: one year (4 issues) U.S. and possessions: \$1.65; Canada and Pan American Union Countries: \$2.00; all other countries: \$2.50. Copyright 1968 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Copyrighted 1956, 1957 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Co. All rights reserved.

Guardian of the Crystal Gate



The girl beckoned seductively,



luring him into unknown perils.

GUARDIAN OF THE CRYSTAL GATE

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Men were vanishing through the deadly gateway of crystal, lured to their destruction by the sensuous body of a woman born for but one reason—to tempt men. Could the riddle be solved with no other clue but a handful of flashing diamonds?

IT BEGAN quietly. I walked in, sat down, and the Chief, in a quick motion, dropped a diamond in front of me on his desk.

I stared blankly at the jewel. It was healthy-sized, emerald-cut, blue-white. I looked up at him.

"So?"

"Take a close look at it, Les." He shoved it across the desk at me with his stubby fingers. I reached out, picked up the diamond—it felt cool to touch—and examined it.

Right in the heart of the gem was a thin brown area of clouding, marring the otherwise flawless diamond. I nodded. "It looks—like a burnt-out fuse," I said, puzzled.

The Chief nodded solemnly. "Exactly." He opened a desk

drawer and reached in, and grasped what looked like a whole handful of other diamonds. "Here," he said. "Enjoy yourself." He sent them sliding out on the desk; they rolled across the shiny marbled desktop. Some went skittering to the floor, others dropped into my lap, others spread out in a gleaming array in front of me. There must have been forty of them.

The Chief's eye met mine. "Each one of those diamonds," he said, "represents one dead man."

I coughed. I've had some funny cases since joining the Bureau, but this was the fanciest hook the Chief had used yet. I started scooping up the diamonds that had fallen to the floor. They were of all sizes, all cuts—a million dol-

lars' worth, maybe. More, maybe.

"Don't bother," the Chief said. "I'll have the charwoman pick them up when I leave. They're not worth anything, you know."

"Not worth anything?" I looked at the ones I had in my hand. Each was marred by the same strange brown imperfection, that fuse blowout. I closed my hand, feeling them grind together.

"Not a cent. For one thing, they're all flawed, as you can easily see. For another, they're all synthetics. Paste, every one of them. Remarkably convincing paste, but paste all the same."

I leaned back in my chair, put my hands together, and said, "Okay. I'm hooked. Put the job on the line for me, will you?" I was thinking, *This is the screwiest one yet. And I've had some corkers.*

"Here's the pitch, Les." He drew out a long sheet of crisp onionskin paper, and handed it to me. Neatly typed on it was a list of names and addresses. I ran down the list quickly without hitting any familiar ones.

"Well? Who are they?"

"They're missing persons, Les. They've all disappeared in this city between—ah—"

He took the list back—"27 November, 2261, and 11 February of this year. The list totals sixty-six names. And those are just the ones we know about."

"And the diamonds?"

"That's where this Bureau comes in," he said. "They only send us the screwy ones, as you've no doubt discovered by now. In each disappearance case listed on this sheet, one of those burnt-out diamonds was found in the room the missing man was last seen in. In every case."

I frowned and scratched an ear reflectively. "You say there's a tie-in with the diamonds, Chief?"

He nodded. "One burnt-out diamond in exchange for one man. It's a recurrent pattern of correlation. Those men are disappearing and those diamonds have something to do with it. We don't know what."

"And you want me to find out, eh?"

"That's only part of it." He moistened his lips. "Suppose I tell you where you fit into the picture, and let you decide what you want to do yourself. I can't force you, you know."

"I haven't turned down a case since I've been with the Bureau," I reminded him.

"Good." He stood up. "Let's see you keep that record in-

tact, then. Because we've just found one of these diamonds that *isn't* burnt out!"

The vault swung open, and the Chief led the way in. He was a short, blocky little man, hardly impressive-looking at all. But he knew his job perfectly—and his job was to maneuver muscleheaded underlings like myself into positions where they were just about committed to risk life and limb for the good old Bureau without knowing quite what they were going into.

I was in that uncomfortable position now. It wasn't going to be easy explaining this gambit to Peg, either, I thought.

He crossed the shadowy floor to an inner safe, deftly dialed the combination, and let the door come creaking open. He drew out a little lead box.

"Here it is," he said.

I reached for it in my usual melon-headed manner but he drew it back quickly out of my grasp. "Easy," he said. "This thing is dangerous." Slowly, he lifted the top of the box just a crack.

A pure, silvery beam of brightness shot out and lit up the whole room.

"It must be a beauty," I said.

"It is. Diamonds like these have lured sixty-six men to what we assume is their death, in the last three months. This particular one hasn't had a chance to go into action yet."

I took the box from him. It was hard to resist the temptation of lifting the top and staring at that wonderful diamond again, but I managed. I wanted to find out all the angles of the job before I got involved.

"One of our cleaning-women found the stone yesterday, right after I left. She called me at home. At first I thought it was one of the ones I was working with—one of the burnt-out ones. But from the way she described it, I knew it was something special. I had her box it this way at once. No one's seen it yet, except in little peeks like the one I just gave you."

He tapped the box. "I'll tell you my theory," he said, "and you can take it from there." His voice ricocheted around unpleasantly in the silent vault. "This diamond is *bait*, in some way. The things have been appearing, and men have been doing something with them; I don't know what. But the diamonds are directly connected with this wave of disappearances."

I started to object, but he checked me.

"Okay, Les. I know it sounds crazy. How would you like to prove otherwise?"

"You're a sneaky one," I told him, grinning. Then the grin vanished as I stared at the little lead box. "I'll do it," I said. "But make sure that Peg gets the pension, will you?"

"Don't worry," he said, matching my grin. "She'll get every penny she deserves—after I get through grabbing, of course." He started to lead the way out of the vault. I followed and he closed the door behind me.

"You take that diamond along with you," he said, indicating the box. "Play with it. Do anything you like. But come back with a solution to this vanishing business. Here," he said. "Take a few of these burnt-out ones too."

"Yeah. Peg might like them," I said. "They'll look swell with black."

I turned to go. As I reached the door, something occurred to me. I paused.

"Say—I think I've found a hole in your theory. How come that charwoman didn't disappear when she found the diamond?"

He smiled. "Take another look at the list I gave you, Les.

All the names on it are *men's* names. Whatever this is, it doesn't affect women at all."

"Hmm. Thought I had you there, for a minute."

"You ought to know better than that, Les."

Peg didn't like the idea one little bit.

I called her right after I left the Bureau office, and told her the chief had a new project for me. I didn't tell her what it was, but from the tone of my voice she must have guessed it was something risky.

I saw her face in the screen go tight, with the mouth pulled up in the little frown she's so fond of making every time I get stuck into another of the Bureau's weirdies.

"Les, what is it this time?"

"Can't tell you over the phone," I said, in mock accents of melodrama. "But it's a doozie, that's for sure." I fingered the leaden box in my pocket.

"I'll come over after work," she said. "Les, don't let that man get you doing impossible things again."

"Don't worry, baby. This new business won't take any time at all," I lied. "And the Bureau pays its help well. See you later, doll."

"Right." I broke the con-

nection and watched her anxious face dissolve into a swirl of rainbow colors and trickle off the viewer, leaving the screen looking a dirty grey. I stared at the dead screen for a couple of minutes, and then got up.

I was worried too. The Bureau—that's its only name, just plain The Bureau—was formed a while back, specifically to handle screwball things like this one. In a world as overpopulated and complex as ours is, you need a force like the Bureau — silent, anonymous, out of the limelight. We take care of the odd-ball things, the things we'd prefer the populace didn't get to hear about.

Like this one. Like this business of people pushing off into thin air, leaving burnt-out diamonds behind. The only people on Earth who could have even a remote chance of worming some sanity out of that one were—us. More precisely, me.

I stopped at a corner tavern and had a little fortification before going home. The barkeep was an inquisitive type, and I rambled on and on about some fictitious business problems of mine, inventing a whole sad story about a lumber warehouse and my shady partner. I didn't dare talk

about my real business, of course, but it felt good to be able to unload some kind of trouble even if it was phoney.

Then I caught a quick coper and headed for home. I got out at the depot and walked, feeling the leaden box tapping ominously against my thigh every step of the way. Peg was there when I came in.

"You made it pretty quick," I said, surprised. "Seems to me you don't get out of work till four, and it's only three-thirty now."

"We got let off early today, Les. Holiday." She looked up at me, with strain and worry evident on her face, and ran nervous fingers through her close-cut red hair. "I came right over."

I went to the cabinet and poured two stiff ones.

"Here's to the Chief," I said. "And to the Bureau."

She shook her head. "Don't make jokes, Les. Drink to anyone else, but not to the Bureau. Why don't you drink to us?"

"What's wrong, Peg? The Bureau is what's going to keep us going, doll. The salary I get from them—"

"—will be just adequate to get you the finest tombstone available, as soon as he gives you a job you can't handle."

She stared up at me. Her eyes were cold and sharp from anger, but I could also see the beginnings of two tears in them. I kissed them away, and felt her relax. I sat down and pulled out the handful of burnt-out diamonds.

"Here," I said. "You can make earrings out of them."

"Les! Where did these—"

I told her the whole story, starting at the beginning. I always tell Peg exactly what each mission of mine is about. Doing that violates security regulations, I know, but I'm sure of Peg. Absolutely sure. When I tell her something, it's like telling myself; it doesn't get any further. Which is why I was able to keep company with her, with the eventual idea of marrying her. In the Bureau, you don't think of getting married unless you can find a woman who can keep her mouth shut. Peg could.

"You mean these diamonds are instrumental in the disappearances?" she asked, wonderingly.

I nodded. "That's what we think. And I have one other little exhibit for you." Slowly I drew out the lead box and opened it, only a crack, and let a single beam of radiance escape before slamming it shut again.

She gasped in awe. "That's *beautiful*! But how—?"

"That's where my job begins," I said. "That diamond is an unused specimen, one that hasn't functioned yet."

"Just how do *you* fit into this?" she asked suspiciously.

I stood up. "I'll find out soon enough. I'm going to go into the next room," I said, "and see how this diamond works. And then I'm going to go wherever it takes me, and worry about getting back after I get there."

The words fell so easily from my mouth that it seemed as if that had actually been my plan all along. Really, it hadn't; I didn't have any idea where I was going to begin this case, but certainly that wasn't any way to go about it.

But as I spoke the words, I saw that that was what I had to do. That was the way the Bureau worked. Go straight to the heart of the matter, and worry about the consequences to yourself later.

"Les—" Peg began, and then knocked it off. She knew it wouldn't do her any good to complain, and she didn't try. I loved her for it. I knew she didn't like my job, and I knew she'd give anything to have me go into some sane, safe industry—like jetcar racing, or something, I suppose—but

at least she kept her mouth shut once I got going on a project.

"You wait here," I told her. "Fix a couple of drinks for us. I'm going to adjoin to the next room and play around with this piece of glitter for a while."

"Be careful," she urged.

"I always am," I said. I gave her a kiss, and as I felt her soft, responsive lips against mine I wondered just where in hell that diamond was going to lead me. I didn't want to get too far from Peg, I thought suddenly.

Then I broke away, scooped up the lead box, and went into my den, closing the door behind me.

I sat down at the desk and spread the burnt-out diamonds in a little semi-circle around the box. The room was cold, and I was shivering a little—and not just from the draft, either.

I turned on my desk light and sat there for a while, staring at the glistening row of gems, staring at the odd little brown cloud disfiguring each one.

Then, slowly, I reached for the box.

Sixty-six men, for a reason I didn't understand, had disappeared. The diamonds had

something to do with it. I didn't know what. But I had an overriding feeling that I was slated to be Number Sixty-Seven.

It's a job, I thought. *It's my job*. And there was only one way to do it. My fingers quivered a little, just a little, as I started to open the box.

Brightness began to stream from it as soon as the lid was lifted, and I felt a bead of sweat break out on my forehead and go trickling down back of my ear. With perhaps too much caution, I lifted the lid clear back and lay bare the diamond nestling within, like a pearl inside an oyster.

I had never seen anything so lovely in my life. It was emerald-cut, neat and streamlined, with uncanny brilliance lurking in its smooth facets. It was small, but perfect, symmetrical and clear. It looked like a tiny spark of cold, blue-white fire.

Then I looked closer.

There was something in the heart of the diamond—not the familiar brown flaw of the others, but something of a different color, something moving and flickering. Before my eyes, it changed and grew.

And I saw what it was. It was the form of a girl—a woman, rather, a voluptuous, writhing nude form in the

center of the gem. Her hair was a lustrous blue-black, her eyes a piercing ebony. She was gesturing to me, holding out her hands, incredibly beckoning from within the heart of the diamond.

I felt my legs go limp. She was growing larger, coming closer, holding out her arms, beckoning, calling—

She seemed to fill the room. The diamond grew to gigantic size, and my brain whirled and bobbed in dizzy circles. I sensed the overpowering, wordless call.

Then I heard the door open and close behind me, and I heard Peg's anguished scream: "*Les!*"

There was the sound of footsteps running toward me, but I didn't turn. I felt Peg's arms around my shoulder. She seemed to be holding me back.

I tore loose. The girl from the diamond was calling to me, and I felt inexorably drawn. "*Les!*" I heard Peg call again, and then again, more faintly. Her voice seemed to fade away, and the diamond grew, and grew, and seemed to take up the entire universe. And within it, now life size, was that girl.

I went to her.

There was greyness, and void.

I found myself alone. Somewhere.

I was flat on my face, breathing in a strange, warm, alien air, lying stretched out with my nose buried in a thick carpet of blue-green moss. I stumbled to my feet and looked around, still hearing the echoes of Peg's fading cries resounding in my head.

Strange twittering noises sounded from above. Still too stunned to do much besides react to direct stimuli, I glanced up and saw a vicious-looking black-feathered bird with gleaming red talons leap from one tree to another.

Once I recovered my mental equilibrium, my first feeling was one of bitter, irrational anger—anger at the Chief for having let me fall into this job, anger at Peg for not forcing me to turn down the assignment, anger at myself for letting that diamond suck me into its field.

I was Number Sixty-Seven, all right. Les Hayden, vanished man. I could imagine Peg's terror-stricken face as she saw me disappear before her eyes and then picked up a burnt-out diamond.

Wherever those sixty-six guys had gone, I had followed. I looked around again. I had landed on some alien world, evidently, and I took the re-

alization a lot more calmly than I should have. I was pretty blasé, as a matter of fact.

It *could* have been the Congo, of course, or the Amazon basin—but that wasn't too probable. For one thing, most of the places like that on Earth are pretty well civilized-looking by now. For another, no place, not even the Amazon, had birds like the ones that were flitting through the trees here. No place.

After the anger had washed through me, I calmed down a little. I leaned against one of the gigantic trees and groped for a clue, something to pick on as a starting point for the investigation I was about to conduct, the investigation that would clear things up. I was here on *business*.

I was in the middle of a vast jungle. The air was warm and moist, and clinging vines dangled down from the great trees. There didn't seem to be any other animal life, except for the myriad infernal birds.

Overhead, behind the curtain of vines, I could see the sun streaming down. It wasn't the familiar yellow light of Sol, either; the sun here was small, blue-white, and hot. I was sweating.

I stripped the jacket off and dangled it on the limb of a tree nearby, as a landmark,

and started to walk. Meantime pounding away in my head, was the vision of that impossible girl inside that impossibly lovely diamond. She was the bait that had trapped me.

I saw how the process worked. These diamonds appeared, and the unlucky recipient would stare at them, as I did, hypnotized into thinking there was a beckoning girl inside.

Then, through some magic, the trap snapped, and the unsuspecting victim got drawn in and carried across space to an uninhabited jungle planet.

Why? That was what I was going to find out—I hoped.

I started to walk, moving slowly through the thick haze of the steaming jungle. I heard the twitter of the birds, as a sort of chirping mockery from above, and now and then a little animal jumped out from behind the trees and scurried across my path. There wasn't a sign of another living being. I wondered if each victim got sent to a planet of his own; I hoped not. I was starting to feel terribly alone.

The jungle seemed endless, and that blue-white sun was getting hotter and hotter with each passing minute. I began

to think that I was moving in circles. One tree looked just like the next.

I walked for perhaps an hour, with the sweat pouring down my arms and shoulders and my legs getting wobbly from the strain and the heat. Floating in front of me all the time was the vision of Peg's face as she must have looked the moment I vanished.

I tried to picture the scene. Probably the first thing she'd do, when she got her balance back, would be to call the Bureau, get the Chief on the wire, and curse him black and blue. She wasn't a weak woman. She'd let him know in no uncertain terms what she thought of him for giving me this job, for sending me out to do and die for the Bureau.

But what would she do then? Where would she go? Would she forget me and find someone else? The thought chilled me. I kept slogging on through that infernal mud-hole of a planet, and there was nothing in sight but trees and more of them. After a while longer, I peeled off my shirt and wrapped it around the bole of a lanky sapling. Another landmark, I thought.

I was starting to get dreadfully depressed by the loneliness, by the dead, paradoxical emptiness of this fantastically

fertile world. There didn't seem to be any way out, any hope at all, and I was beginning to give in to my fears in a way I usually didn't do.

But just then a brown something came bounding out of the tangled nest of vines above me and struck me hard, knocking me to the ground. I hit the springy moss with a terrific impact, recoiled, and rolled over, feeling my lip swell where I'd split it.

I found myself facing what looked like an ape, about the size of a small, wiry man. The beast had two pairs of arms, two glowing, malicious eyes, and as nice a pair of saber teeth as you could find outside the Museum of Natural History. I scrambled a foot or two back, and lashed out with my feet.

I wasn't alone here any more, for sure.

The animal fought back furiously, wrapping its four arms around me, bringing its two razor-sharp teeth much too close to my throat to make me happy.

But I had just been waiting for something like this. I needed something concrete on which I could take out all my fear and rage and resentment, and I met the animal's attack firmly and came back on the

creature's own grounds, fighting with arms and legs and knees and anything else handy. Overhead, I heard the chattering of the birds grow to a tumultuous frenzy.

I pounded away, smashed a fist into those two gleaming yellow sabers and felt them crack beneath my driving knuckles, felt the teeth give and break beneath the impact. A hot lancet of pain shot down my hand, but the animal gave a searing cry and jumped back.

I was on him immediately. All its attention was being given to the two broken teeth; its upper pair of hands was busy trying to stanch the flow of bright blood from its mouth, and the other two were waving in feeble circles. I came down hard with my feet, once, twice, a third time, and then the arms stopped waving.

I walked away, looking cautiously around to see if the animal had any relatives in the neighborhood. Suddenly, the empty, lonely jungle seemed overcrowded; behind every spreading leaf there might be another of these saber-toothed horrors. Breathing hard, feeling the blood dripping from my cut knuckles, I started to edge on through the jungle.

My face was set in a grim mask. It looked like life on this planet was going to be a permanent struggle for survival, judging from my first taste of its wildlife—with no way out. I thought of Peg, back on Earth, and wondered what she was doing, what she was thinking of.

I kept going, determined to keep moving at all costs, determined to beat this world and find my way back to Earth. The fight had set my hormones rolling, apparently; the outpour of adrenalin was just what I needed to galvanize me out of the fit of depression I had been sinking into. Now I was fully alive, wide awake, and wanting out desperately.

Then I glanced up. There seemed to be a fire up ahead; white, brilliant light was streaming through the jungle, illuminating the dark recesses around me. I drew my breath. If it really was fire, that meant people—savages, perhaps? I advanced cautiously, dying a dozen times whenever I scrunched down on a twig.

After about fifty yards, the path swivelled abruptly at a right-angle bend, and I found myself suddenly out of the jungle. I emerged from the thickly-packed trees and saw

what was causing all the light. I whistled slowly.

It wasn't a fire. It was a *diamond*, planted smack in the middle of a wide treeless clearing—the biggest diamond anyone ever dreamed of, looming ten feet off the ground, lying there like a gigantic chunk of frozen flame. It was cut with a million facets from which the bright sunlight glinted fiercely. All around it, the trees had been levelled to the ground. The great gem stood all alone, in solitary majesty.

Not quite alone, though. For as I stood there, at the edge of the jungle, staring in open-mouthed astonishment, I saw a figure come up over the top of the diamond, poise for a moment on the narrow facet at the very peak, and then leap lightly to the ground.

It was the girl—the girl whose beckoning arms had enticed me into this nightmare in the first place. She was coming toward me.

The girl in the diamond had been nude, but I guess that was only part of the bait. This girl was clad, though what she was wearing took care of the legal minimum and not much more. Otherwise, it was the same girl, radiant with an incredible sort of magnetism. In person, she had the same kind

of effect that the image in the diamond had had.

I stood there, dazzled.

"I've been waiting for you," she said. Her voice was low and throbbing, with just the merest echo of something alien and strange about it. "It has been so long since I called, and you did not come."

I just stared at her. Up till this moment I had thought Peg was about as sexy as a girl could be, as far as I was concerned. But I was wrong. This item made Peg look almost like an old washboard by comparison.

She was all curves, but with a rippling strength underneath that was a joy to see. Her hair was deep blue-black, with glossy undertones, and her eyes were deep and compelling.

"My name is Sharane," she said softly. "I have been waiting for you."

The sunlight kept bouncing down off that colossal diamond, and Sharane stood there, brilliant in its reflected light. Her skin seemed to glow, it was so radiant. She took another step toward me, arms outstretched.

I moved back a step. So much glamor in one body frightened me. The last time I had listened to this girl's call,

it had drawn me across space and brought me to this planet. Devil only knew what might happen this time.

Besides, there was Peg. So I backed off.

"What do you want?" I demanded. "Why have I been brought here? Where is this place?"

"What does it matter?" Sharane asked lightly, and from the tone of her voice I started to wonder myself. "Come here," she urged.

I started to laugh, I'm afraid. It was all so preposterous, this whole business of diamonds that make people shoot off to some world in space, and this lynx-eyed temptress coming toward me—I dissolved in near-hysterical laughter.

But I was laughing out of the other side of my face a moment later, when Sharane stepped close to me and I felt her warmth near me. She looked up at me, with the same expression on her face that the image in the diamond had had. I was defenseless.

Peg, I thought. *Peg, help me!*

She put her arms around me, and I started to pull back and then stopped. I couldn't. She came close, enfolded herself around me.

Somehow at that moment

the distant Peg seemed pretty pale and tawdry next to Sharane. I forgot her. I forgot Peg, I forgot the Chief, the Bureau, Earth—I forgot everything, except Sharane and the blindingly brilliant diamond in front of me.

She drew my head down, and our lips met. The contact was warm, tingling—

Then I felt myself grow rigid, as if I were rooted to the ground.

Sharane pulled her lips away, and took a step back. She looked at me, strangely, half triumphantly and half sadly. I saw her sigh, saw her breasts rise and fall.

I strained to move, and couldn't. I was frozen!

"Sharane!"

"I am sorry," she said. Her musical voice seemed to be modulated into a minor key, as if she *were* really sorry. "This is the way things must be."

And then she lifted me up, slung my stiffened form over her shoulder as easily as if I were an empty sack, and started walking away!

I struggled impotently against the strange paralysis that had overcome me, and cursed bitterly. A second time, Sharane had trapped me! Once, when she called from

the depths of the crystal; now, when she betrayed me with a kiss.

I rolled my eyes in anguish, but that was as close as I could come to motion. Sharane carried me lightly, easily, around to the other side of the gigantic diamond. "You will have friends here," she said softly.

I looked around, and blinked in surprise. For half a dozen other Earthmen lay, similarly frozen, behind the great diamond.

Sharane very carefully laid me down in their midst, and left me.

She had put me between two other frozen prisoners. Further away, I saw four more. All six were gripped by the same strange force that held me.

"Greetings, friend," I heard the man on my left say. "The name is Caldwell—Frederic Caldwell. What's yours?" It was almost as if we were meeting in a cafeteria, he was so casual.

"Les Hayden," I said.

"My name is Strauss," said the one on my right. "Ed Strauss. Glad to meet you, Hayden. Join our merry band."

Strauss—Caldwell—those were two of the names on that list of sixty-six vanishers.

And I'm *Sixty-Seven*. *Welcome to the fold*, I thought.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Ten days," said Strauss.

"A week," Caldwell said. "But you'd never know it. When you're frozen like this, you don't need food or anything. You're out of circulation, period. You just lie here, waiting for the next sucker to be deposited in the vault."

"Yeah," said Strauss. "There were about forty guys here when I came, but one day a ship came down and some huge *things* packed most of them up. That made things pretty quiet for a while. We've just been lying here, those of us that are left. Every once in a while Sharane catches someone new."

"Did both of you get snagged the same way?"

"I found a diamond on my desk one day," said Caldwell. "Came out of nowhere. I started staring at it—and I guess you know the rest of the story."

"It's Sharane's kiss that does it," Strauss said. "I think it sets up some kind of force field that freezes us. And we stay here, and wait for the alien ship to come pick us up and take us away."

"To the slaughterhouse," said Caldwell dully.

I pushed and struggled, but it was to no avail. I was efficiently straitjacketed. Above me, the big diamond stared coldly out, its radiant brilliance seeming to mock us.

Caldwell and Strauss had been trapped the same way I had—by the beckoning diamond. I wondered how many more Sharane would catch, would draw across space to this strange planet. And I wondered *why*? Who was this strange woman, what power did she have, why was she doing what she did? What motivated her?

I didn't know. And it didn't look like I was ever going to find out.

All I knew was I was caught, and there didn't seem to be any way out. But I wasn't going to give up. I could still keep on hoping.

We lay there for hours, talking occasionally, more often remaining silent, staring up at the cloudless sky. I could see how the days would roll by, in empty, mindless waiting, until the mysterious ship returned for its next load of Earthmen.

By dint of much eyeball-rolling, I was able to make out what my two companions looked like. Strauss was balding, sandy-haired, middle

aged, Caldwell much younger, dynamic-looking.

There wasn't much we could say, and after a while conversation ceased entirely. We were so placed that I could see the giant diamond clearly, and I started to pass the time by staring at its peak, wondering how many carats the thing could weigh. Millions, no doubt.

Then I began searching the sky, waiting for the ship to come, the ship that would carry us off to our unknown next destination. After a while longer I grew tired, and closed my eyes. I slept, uneasily, and no doubt I would have been tossing and turning if only I could move at all.

I was awakened by the sound of Caldwell's deep, sharp voice exclaiming, "Look! Here comes a new one!"

Then Strauss commented, "And it's a girl!"

I struggled to get my eyes open and keep them that way, and swiveled them around, searching for the newcomer. And then I saw her.

She was emerging from the edge of the jungle. I saw her plainly, clad in sweater and tight-clinging khaki trousers; she had evidently had a rough time of it in the jungle, because her sweater was torn

and shredded and her hair was wildly disheveled. But she kept moving onward, her eyes wide in amazement at the sight of the diamond.

She was Peg.

I watched her almost dazedly as she made her way across the clearing. I knew she couldn't see me yet, but I could see her. It was Peg, all right. How, why she had come, I could only conjecture. But she was here, madly, unbelievably, and I was glad to see her.

"Where'd *she* come from?" Caldwell asked.

"I thought only men came through," said Strauss. "Maybe she's an accomplice of Sharane."

"No," I said. "I know her."

I tried to call to her, to attract her attention in some way. I didn't know where Sharane was.

"Peg!" I called. My voice was a hoarse croak, barely more than a whisper. I tried again. "Peg! Peg!"

The third time she heard me. I saw her mouth drop open as she turned slowly and saw us spread out on the ground, and then she started running joyfully toward us.

"Les! Oh, Les!" she called, from a hundred yards away. Her voice came across clearly, and at the moment it seemed

like the most wonderful sound I had ever heard.

I watched her as she ran, drinking in the sight of her—the smooth stride, the long, powerful legs, the bobbing red hair that fluttered up and down as she ran. And a hot burst of shame flooded my face as I remembered the kiss—Sharane's kiss.

Peg would forgive me though. I knew she would.

She kept running, running toward us—and then she stopped and recoiled back, as if she had struck a glass wall.

I saw her move a few paces and rub her nose as if she had bruised it. Then she stepped forward again, and, in perplexity, extended a hand in front of her. It stopped short at the same barrier.

She began to edge around in a wary semicircle, feeling in front of her, and everywhere it was the same. An invisible barrier, blocking us off from her. She wouldn't be able to reach us. Whoever had snared us really knew his business.

Tears of frustration came to her eyes, but she wiped them away and continued to search for some break in the barrier, while I shouted words of encouragement to her. It was a miracle that Peg was here at all, Peg whom I thought I'd

never see again, and I wanted desperately to be holding her tight.

She completed the circle around us, without finding any way in. I saw her kick the barrier viciously, saw her foot stop in mid-air as the invisible field rebuffed the blow.

And then, standing spellbound, I saw Sharane come up behind her.

"*Watch it!*" I yelled, but there was no need of the warning. Peg turned, and the two women faced each other uneasily.

I felt torn apart when I saw the two of them together. Peg was a wonderful girl, wonderful to look at, wonderful to be with—but Sharane! Sharane was something different, something unearthly, something irresistible. No wonder she had trapped sixty-seven men so far. Sixty-seven, plus Peg—if Peg had been trapped.

The two women moved closer to each other, and then, incredibly, I heard Sharane say, in the same throaty, erotic voice she had used on me and on everyone else who had come through the crystal gateway, "I've been waiting for you."

Peg's sarcastic answer rang out sharp and clear. "I'll bet you have," she snapped.

"It has been so long since I

called, and you did not come," Sharane said caressingly.

My eyes popped. Was Sharane trying to make love to Peg? What kind of thing *was* Sharane, anyway?

"Let me through that barrier," Peg demanded.

Sharane made no answer, but merely moved closer. "My name is Sharane," she said. "I have been waiting for you."

Word for word, the same routine she'd given me! Only how did she expect it to work on Peg?

It didn't. Sharane moved even closer, reached out her arms, started to embrace Peg—

And Peg knocked her sprawling with an open-fisted blow.

Sharane went reeling back on the ground, but picked herself up with no apparent bruises, and returned to her strange task. She moved back to Peg, turning on all her siren charms.

It was incredible, unbelievable. But Peg wasn't to be tempted as easily as a mere man would be. As Sharane approached, Peg whipped out at her with another blow, and followed with a neat fist to the dark-haired woman's stomach.

Sharane backed up, and apparently caught on that she wasn't getting the usual reac-

tion from Peg. She charged in a mad flurry, failed to get much of a handhold on Peg's short-cut hair, and launched out in an attack of wild violence.

Peg parried most of the punches, but a stray fingernail got through the defense and raked down her cheek, leaving a long, bloody line, and one of Sharane's frantic blows landed in her mid-section, throwing her back gasping for breath.

I heard my own voice shouting encouragement, roaring as if I were at a prizefight. And, from around me, I heard the other men cheering Peg on too.

I had never seen two women fight, before. It was quite a sight.

Sharane had the upper hand for a few moments, forcing Peg back, and on the areas of flesh exposed where Peg's sweater had been torn in the jungle, I saw livid bruises starting to appear.

Then Peg regained the initiative, and with an outburst of kicks, punches, and slaps she drove Sharane back. Peg used every tactic in the book, and some that weren't—such as reaching out, seizing Sharane's lovely blue-black hair, and yanking.

Suddenly I saw Sharane break away out of a clinch and dash back, toward us, through the barrier. Peg followed on her heels, just a step behind.

Sharane must have dissolved the barrier she'd set up in order to let herself get through, but the maneuver turned out a flop, because Peg came right through with her. Sharane turned, glaring angrily at her when she saw the strategy had been negated, and set out in a run—straight for the giant diamond!

"Go get her, Peg!" I shouted, almost breathless from the strain of watching the women fight while I myself was unable to move a muscle.

Sharane was climbing the diamond, pulling herself up by grasping the sharp corners of the facets, hauling herself up over that great shining eye. And Peg was right behind her.

I watched as Peg started the ascent, slipping and sliding, cutting her hands on the keen edges. Sharane was at the top, balanced precariously on the uppermost facet. The sun was beating down hard, shooting blinding flashes of light slashing off the diamond into our eyes.

As Peg approached the top, Sharane stooped and pushed her off. She went sliding back down, catching hold half way

to the ground. I saw that she had ripped the leg of her slacks open, but she didn't appear to be cut herself. She dangled for a moment and then with dogged determination she climbed her way back to the top. My heart pounded as frantically as if I were taking part in the struggle myself.

Sharane kicked out viciously. I saw Peg start to lose her grip, begin to fall back—and then seize Sharane's flailing foot, and, holding on with an unbreakable grip, begin to haul herself to the top of the diamond!

She reached it at last, and the two of them stood here, rocking shakily back and forth in the narrow area, while the blazing sun burnt down fiercely on them, sending rivers of perspiration coursing down their bare flesh. They were locked in a double grip, shivering from exhaustion, neither one able to gain advantage over the other.

Then I saw Peg's muscles flex, and she began to bend Sharane back, back, until the other woman was almost doubled over. Suddenly Sharane's leg gave way, and she toppled; through some miracle, she landed on her back, still atop the diamond, and Peg pounced down on her. Peg

clamped her hands on Sharane's lovely throat, and started to squeeze.

Sharane's arms began to thresh wildly—and strangely, as we watched dumfounded, Sharane began to *change*! As Peg kept up the relentless pressure, Sharane's shape began to alter; arms became tentacles, skin thickened and became something else, changed color from radiant white to loathsome purple. Where there had been a lovely seductress a moment before lay a ghastly *thing*.

Peg jumped back, startled at the transformation; Sharane, or the thing that had been Sharane, lashed out with a tentacle, and Peg, still clinging to the other, toppled back and off the diamond, pinwheeling to the ground.

The Sharane-thing lost its balance, dropped off the other side. I saw Peg lying unconscious on the ground, watched in impotent horror as the alien being started to rise—

And suddenly I discovered I was free! My arm moved, my leg! Apparently the alien had needed all its power to fight Peg, and had been unable to spare the concentration needed to maintain our imprisonment.

I was up and running in an

instant, feeling strength ebb back into my stiff, cramped muscles. I leaped on the monster before it could rise, felt its strange, dry, alien odor, and then my hands were around its scaly throat. I looked down, searched for some trace of the loveliness that had once tempted me, and could find none. I saw a weird, terrifying face with glinting many-faceted eyes and a twisted, agonized mouth. I kept up the pressure.

I heard the creature's breath gasping out, and then I felt hands on my shoulders—Peg's, on one shoulder, and a man's hand, on the other.

I looked up and saw Strauss' pudgy face. "Don't kill the thing," he said. "Get up, and let's find out what's been going on."

"No," I said. But they pulled me off.

I stood up, and watched the alien writhing on the ground, struggling to recover its breath. A surge of hatred ran through me.

"What are you?" I demanded. "Where are we?"

"Give me some time," it said, barely able to speak—but I could still detect in its voice the same underlying hypnotic tone Sharane's voice had had. It was the only point the

thing had in common with the girl. "Let me recover. I mean no further harm."

"I don't trust it," I said uneasily.

"Why not wait?" asked Strauss. "It can't make any trouble for us now—obviously there has been some kind of emotional surrender or it can't take control of us. That must be how the girl was able to defeat it."

I nodded. "That sounds reasonable." I stared coldly down at the battered, suffering alien. "All right. Let's let it catch its breath, and we'll find out what's what."

I was glad, now, that they had pulled me off. Carried away the way I was, I would undoubtedly have throttled the creature—and the Chief would undoubtedly have throttled me for it when I got back—if I got back. For one thing, with the creature alive there was a chance we might find out what this was all about. For another, with the creature dead we might have no way of getting back to Earth.

So I stood back, letting the anger seep out of me, and turned to Peg.

She had come off on top in the fight, but she was pretty well battered. One of her lovely blue eyes had an even lovelier shiner, and she was

thoroughly scratched and bruised. Her sweater was just about ripped clean off her, and she was holding the tatters together self-consciously.

"How did *you* get here?" I asked.

She smiled, and through all the blood and bruises it still looked wonderful.

"I went to the Chief, after you—disappeared."

"Wish you hadn't," I said. "I didn't want him to know I was letting you in on anything."

"He doesn't know. All I did was ask him to tell me what kind of job you had been sent out on. After I told him what had happened to you, he explained."

"And then?"

"Then I requested that the next unused diamond that was found be turned over to me. He didn't want to, but finally he agreed to it."

I looked at the slowly twisting creature lying on the ground, and back to Peg. "So?"

"So another diamond materialized that night, and the Chief called me. I came and picked it up, and when I was alone I looked at it. There was that girl in it, calling to me." She made a face. "It was disgusting."

"And then you were drawn in?" I asked, remembering the way Sharane had trapped me.

"Of course not, silly. I didn't respond to that posturing girl at all, and so I couldn't be caught. But I *voluntarily* came through. I willed myself to be drawn in, and I was. I landed up in that jungle, and wandered out here when I saw the light of the diamond."

I nodded. "And then Sharane came after you with her song and dance. Since Sharane was actually an alien with no real idea of the difference between the human sexes, she—it—thought her act would work on you too. But it didn't."

I walked over to where the alien was, and Peg and the six freed captives followed me. Sharane—the Sharane-thing—was sitting up.

"Hurry," it said. "We must talk before the Llanar ship arrives, or there is great danger."

"Who are the Llanar?" I asked, surprised.

"My captors," said the alien. Its weird face was twisted into an expression of cosmic sadness.

"What do you mean, your captors?"

"The Llanar," Sharane said, "are a great race from out there." She gestured at the

sky. "They conquered my people, and they wish to enslave yours through us. They have placed me here, against my will, and shown me how to disguise myself as a human. All who were drawn by the diamond were powerless against me—except—"

She pointed to Peg.

I smiled. "The only thing as hard as a diamond is another diamond. The only thing that could resist Sharane's womanly wiles would be another woman. Those diamonds were set up to trap *men*—and when a woman came through, Sharane here didn't know what to do with her. She had never experienced a human woman."

"I have now," the alien said weakly. "I hope to never again."

"How does this trap work?" Caldwell asked.

"The great diamond here is the focus," Sharane said. "The smaller ones serve as transmitting poles, at the other end of the channel. We send them to Earth, and when men find them they are drawn in. I then tempt them to surrender themselves—and as soon as they do, I freeze them." The alien broke into the alien equivalent of a sob. "Then the Llanar come, and take them

away. They make them slaves, on their home worlds."

The alien sat up, and rubbed itself. "But you have won your freedom from me," it said. "You may return to your planet."

"And you?"

"I must sit here," the alien said. "I must continue to prey on Earth, or the Llanar will kill me."

"We'll close that damnable gateway, don't worry," muttered Caldwell, but I ignored him.

Suddenly all my hatred for Sharane had vanished. I saw the strange thing before me as a *person*, not a thing—a suffering, sensitive person. An alien, true, but very human under the to-me-grotesque exterior. In just those few minutes I learned a lesson: you don't have to have arms and legs and two blue eyes to be a human being.

I saw the whole picture now. Sharane's people were under the domination of still another alien race from deep in the galaxy—the dread Llanar. And the Llanar were forcing Sharane to operate this lonely trap on the edge of the universe, waiting like a spider to net the unfortunates who happened to find one of the treacherous diamonds she scattered.

"You can send us back to Earth?" I asked.

"Yes," Sharane said. "But—"

Then she looked upward, and I saw the sky darken. Coming down, straight above us, was a gleaming golden-hulled spaceship!

Suddenly Sharane came to life. "The Llanar!" she cried. "Run into the jungle—hide, or they'll carry you off! I'll stay out here and get rid of them."

Her form melted and coalesced weirdly, and once again I saw before me the woman-shape. She pointed toward the jungle, and I didn't waste any time arguing. I seized Peg's hand and we broke into a frantic trot, heading for the woods.

We got there breathless, and all six of the freed men came racing in right behind us. We squatted there, silently, watching the Llanar ship descend.

It came down in slow, graceful spirals, hovered overhead, finally settled to the ground—and the Llanar came out.

I won't try to describe them. They were huge, thick-bodied, and I still shudder when I think of what they looked like. They were hideous, hateful, fearsome creatures. I imag-

ined what a whole world of them would be like.

Three of them emerged from the ship, came out, walked up to Sharane. They stood around her, dwarfing her lovely body among them.

They talked for a long while; I heard the low, booming rumble of their voices come crackling over the ground to us. After an extensive discussion, they turned and left. Sharane stood alone.

I watched, quivering with revulsion, as they marched slowly back to their ship, got in, and a moment later a fiery jet-blast carried them aloft. We remained in the forest for a moment or two longer, waiting until the Llanar ship was completely out of sight. Then we dashed out.

Sharane was waiting for us at the base of the great diamond.

"They wanted to know where the new batch of captives was," she said. Her breast was heaving in obvious terror, and it was hard for me to remember, as I looked at her, that minutes before she had been a hideous alien being writhing on the ground. "I told them none had come through since their last pickup."

"What did they say?"

"They were angry that no new slaves were on hand."

I looked at Peg in gratitude. "If it weren't for you, I'd be on my way in that ship."

"It's lucky I came through when I did, darling."

"It certainly is, Miss," said one of the men.

I turned to Sharane. "Can you send us back?"

"It is simple." She reached up, pulled eight diamonds—small ones—from nowhere, and handed one to each of us. "Concentrate," she said.

One by one, the men blinked out and vanished, until only Caldwell and Peg and myself were left. Caldwell looked at me.

"You know," he said, "if you destroy that big diamond, I think it'll close this hellish gateway forever. No one else on Earth will be trapped the way we were."

"I know," I said. "But I don't intend to do it."

His eyes blazed angrily. "Why not? Do you want the Llanar to carry off everyone? For all you know, you'd be a slave on some stinking planet now if your girl hadn't come."

"I'm leaving the gateway open so we can come back through. Someday we'll return, when we're ready—more of us, Sharane. And our

people and your people together will end the Llanar tyranny."

But a new job was beginning.

"I will be waiting for you," Sharane said.

"Go through," I said bluntly to Caldwell. He frowned in concentration and vanished, leaving just Peg and myself facing Sharane.

"I am glad you defeated me," Sharane told Peg. "It may mean the beginning of a long friendship between our peoples."

"Many friendships begin after a deadly battle." I turned to Peg. "Let's go through."

"All right. Goodbye, Sharane."

"Farewell." The alien turned and walked away, slowly, toward the jungle.

We watched her go, standing there, watching that lovely false woman-form glide smoothly away.

The Llanar were powerful, all right—but not so powerful that they couldn't be beaten. I took a last look at the gleaming diamond, and at Sharane's retreating form.

Then she was at the edge of the jungle, waving to us.

But I knew I'd be seeing her again, someday.

And when we do, the Llanar will tremble.

THE END

THE HAPPY UNFORTUNATE

Dekker, back from space, found great physical changes in the people of Earth; changes that would have horrified him five years before. But now, he wanted to be like the rest—even if he had to lose an eye and both ears to do it.

ROLF DEKKER stared incredulously at the slim, handsome young Earther who was approaching the steps of Rolf's tumbling-down Spacertown shack. *He's got no ears*, Rolf noted in unbelief. After five years in space, Rolf had come home to a strangely-altered world, and he found it hard to accept.

Another Earther appeared. This one was about the same size, and gave the same impression of fragility. This one had ears, all right—and a pair of gleaming, two-inch horns on his forehead as well. *I'll be eternally roasted*, Rolf thought. *Now I've seen everything.*

Both Earthers were dressed in neat, gold-inlaid green tunics, costumes which looked terribly out of place amid

the filth of Spacertown, and their hair was dyed a light green to match.

He had been scrutinizing them for several moments before they became aware of him. They both spotted him at once and the one with no ears turned to his companion and whispered something. Rolf, leaning forward, strained to hear.

"... beautiful, isn't he? That's the biggest one I've seen!"

"Come over here, won't you?" the horned one called, in a soft, gentle voice which contrasted oddly with the raucous bellowing Rolf had been accustomed to hearing in space. "We'd like to talk to you."

Just then Kanaday emerged from the door of the shack



The doctor refused to change Dekker, so Dekker was going to change the doctor.

and limped down to the staircase.

"Hey, Rolf!" he called. "Leave those things alone!"

"Let me find out what they want first, huh?"

"Can't be any good, whatever it is," Kanaday growled. "Tell them to get out of here before I throw them back to wherever they came from. And make it fast."

The two Earthers looked at each other uneasily. Rolf walked toward them.

"He doesn't like Earthers, that's all," Rolf explained. "But he won't do anything but yell."

Kanaday spat in disgust, turned, and limped back inside the shack.

"I didn't know you were wearing horns," Rolf said.

The Earther flushed. "New style," he said. "Very expensive."

"Oh," Rolf said. "I'm new here; I just got back. Five years in space. When I left you people looked all alike. Now you wear horns."

"It's the new trend," said the earless one. "We're Indians. When you left the Conforms were in power, style-wise. But the new surgeons can do almost anything, you see."

The shadow of a frown

crossed Rolf's face. "Anything?"

"Almost. They can't transform an Earther into a Spacer, and they don't think they ever will."

"Or vice versa?" Rolf asked.

They sniggered. "What Spacer would want to become an Earther? Who would give up that life, out in the stars?"

Rolf said nothing. He kicked at the heap of litter in the filthy street. *What spacer indeed?* he thought. He suddenly realized that the two little Earthers were staring up at him as if he were some sort of beast. He probably weighed as much as both of them, he knew, and at six-four he was better than a foot taller. They looked like children next to him, like toys. The savage blast of acceleration would snap their flimsy bodies like toothpicks.

"What places have you been to?" the earless one asked.

"Two years on Mars, one on Venus, one in the Belt, one on Neptune," Rolf recited. "I didn't like Neptune. It was best in the Belt; just our one ship, prospecting. We made a pile on Ceres—enough to buy out. I shot half of it on Neptune. Still have plenty left, but I don't know what I can do with it." He didn't add that he had come home puzzled,

wondering why he was a Spacer instead of an Earther, condemned to live in filthy Spacertown when Yawk was just across the river.

They were looking at his shabby clothes, at the dirty brownstone hovel he lived in—an antique of a house four or five centuries old.

"You mean you're rich?" the Earther said.

"Sure," Rolf said. "Every Spacer is. So what? What can I spend it on? My money's banked on Mars and Venus. Thanks to the law I can't legally get it to Earth. So I live in Spacertown."

"Have you ever seen an Earther city?" the earless one asked, looking around at the quiet streets of Spacertown with big powerful men sitting idly in front of every house.

"I used to live in Yawk," Rolf said. "My grandmother was an Earther; she brought me up there. I haven't been back there since I left for space." *They forced me out of Yawk*, he thought. *I'm not part of their species. Not one of them.*

The two Earthers exchanged glances.

"Can we interest you in a suggestion?" They drew in their breath as if they expected to be knocked sprawling.

Kanaday appeared at the door of the shack again.

"Rolf. Hey! You turning into an Earther? Get rid of them two cuties before there's trouble."

Rolf turned and saw a little knot of Spacers standing on the other side of the street, watching him with curiosity. He glared at them.

"I'll do whatever I damn well please," he shouted across.

He turned back to the two Earthers. "Now, what is it you want?"

"I'm giving a party next week," the earless one said. "I'd like you to come. We'd like to get the Spacer slant on life."

"Party?" Rolf repeated. "You mean, dancing, and games, and stuff like that?"

"You'll enjoy it," the Earther said coaxingly. "And we'd all love to have a real Spacer there."

"When is it?"

"A week."

"I have ten days left of my leave. All right," he said. "I'll come."

He accepted the Earther's card, looked at it mechanically, saw the name—Kal Quinton—and pocketed it. "Sure," he said. "I'll be there."

The Earthers moved toward their little jetcar, smiling

gratefully. As Rolf crossed the street, the other Spacers greeted him with cold, puzzled stares.

Kanaday was almost as tall as Rolf, and even uglier. Rolf's eyebrows were bold and heavy; Kanaday's, thick, contorted, bushy clumps of hair. Kanaday's nose had been broken long before in some barroom brawl; his cheekbones bulged; his face was strong and hard. More important, his left foot was twisted and gnarled beyond hope of redemption by the most skillful surgeon. He had been crippled in a jet explosion three years before, and was of no use to the Space-lines any more. They had pensioned him off. Part of the deal was the dilapidated old house in Spacertown which he operated as a boarding-house for transient Spacers.

"What do you want to do that for?" Kanaday asked. "Haven't those Earthers pushed you around enough, so you have to go dance at one of their wild parties?"

"Leave me alone," Rolf muttered.

"You like this filth you live in? Spacertown is just a ghetto, that's all. The Earthers have pushed you right into the muck. You're not even a

human being to them—just some sort of trained ape. And now you're going to go and entertain them. I thought you had brains, Rolf!"

"Shut up!" He dashed his glass against the table; it bounced off and dropped to the floor, where it shattered.

Kanaday's girl Laney entered the room at the sound of the crash. She was tall and powerful-looking, with straight black hair and the strong cheekbones that characterized the Spacers. Immediately she stooped and began shoveling up the broken glass.

"That wasn't smart, Rolf," she said. "That'll cost you half a credit. Wasn't worth it, was it?"

Rolf laid the coin on the edge of the table. "Tell your pal to shut up, then. If he doesn't stop icing me I'll fix his other foot for him and you can buy him a dolly."

She looked from one to the other. "What's bothering you two now?"

"A couple of Earthers were here this morning," Kanaday said. "Slumming. They took a fancy to our young friend here and invited him to one of their parties. He accepted."

"He *what*? Don't go, Rolf. You're crazy to go."

"Why am I crazy?" He tried to control his voice.

"Why should we keep ourselves apart from the Earthers? Why shouldn't the two races get together?"

She put down her tray and sat next to him. "They're more than two races," she said patiently. "Earther and Spacer are two different species, Rolf. Carefully, genetically separated. They're small and weak, we're big and powerful. You've been bred for going to space; they're the castoffs, the ones who were too weak to go. The line between the two groups is too strong to break."

"And they treat us like dirt—like animals," Kanaday said. "But *they're* the dirt. They were the ones who couldn't make it."

"Don't go to the party," Laney said. "They just want to make fun of you. Look at the big ape, they'll say."

Rolf stood up. "You don't understand. Neither of you does. I'm part Earther," Rolf said. "My grandmother on my mother's side. She raised me as an Earther. She wanted me to be an Earther. But I kept getting bigger and uglier all the time. She took me to a plastic surgeon once, figuring he could make me look like an Earther. He was a little man; I don't know what he

looked like to start with but some other surgeon had made him clean-cut and straight-nosed and thin-lipped like all the other Earthers. I was bigger than he was—twice as big, and I was only fifteen. He looked at me and felt my bones and measured me. 'Healthy little ape'—those were the words he used. He told my grandmother I'd get bigger and bigger, that no amount of surgery could make me small and handsome, that I was fit only for space and didn't belong in Yawk. So I left for space the next morning."

"I see," Laney said quietly.

"I didn't say good-bye. I just left. There was no place for me in Yawk; I couldn't pass myself off as an Earther any more. But I'd like to go back and see what the old life was like, now that I know what it's like to be on the other side for a while."

"It'll hurt when you find out, Rolf."

"I'll take that chance. But I want to go. Maybe my grandmother'll be there. The surgeons made her young and pretty again every few years; she looked like my sister when I left."

Laney nodded her head. "There's no point arguing with him, Kanaday. He has to

go back there and find out, so let him alone."

Rolf smiled. "Thanks for understanding." He took out Quinton's card and turned it over and over in his hand.

Rolf went to Yawk on foot, dressed in his best clothes, with his face as clean as it had been in some years. Spacertown was just across the river from Yawk, and the bridges spanning the river were bright and gleaming in the mid-afternoon sun.

The bombs had landed on Yawk during the long-forgotten war, but somehow they had spared the sprawling borough across the river. And so Yawk had been completely rebuilt, once the radioactivity had been purged from the land, while what was now Spacertown consisted mostly of buildings that dated back to the Twentieth Century.

Yawk had been the world's greatest seaport; now it was the world's greatest spaceport. The sky was thick with incoming and outgoing liners. The passengers on the ship usually stayed at Yawk, which had become an even greater metropolis than it had been before the Bomb. The crew crossed the river to Spacertown, where they could find their own kind.

Yawk and Spacertown were like two separate planets. There were three bridges spanning the river, but most of the time they went unused, except by spacemen going back home or by spacemen going to the spaceport for embarkation. There was no regular transportation between the two cities; to get from Spacertown to Yawk, you could borrow a jetcar or you could walk. Rolf walked.

He enjoyed the trip. *I'm going back home*, he thought as he paced along the gleaming arc of the bridge, dressed in his Sunday best. He remembered the days of his own childhood, his parentless childhood. His earliest memory was of a fight at the age of six or so. He had stood off what seemed like half the neighborhood, ending the battle by picking up an older bully, much feared by everyone, and heaving him over a fence. When he told his grandmother about the way he had won the fight she cried for an hour, and never told him why. But they had never picked on him again, though he knew the other boys had jeered at him behind his back as he grew bigger and bigger over the years. "Ape," they called him. "Ape."

But never to his face.

He approached the Yawk end of the bridge. A guard was waiting there—an Earth-guard, small and frail, but with a sturdy-looking blaster at his hip.

"Going back, Spacer?"

Rolf started. How did the guard know? And then he realized that all the guard meant was, are you going back to your ship?

"No. No, I'm going to a party. Kal Quinton's house."

"Tell me another, Spacer." The guard's voice was light and derisive. A swift poke in the ribs would break him in half, Rolf thought.

"I'm serious. Quinton invited me. Here's his card."

"If this is a joke it'll mean trouble. But go ahead; I'll take your word for it."

Rolf marched on past the guard, almost nonchalantly. He looked at the address on the card, *12406 Kenman Road*. He rooted around in his fading memory of Yawk, but he found the details had blurred under the impact of five years of Mars and Venus and the Belt and Neptune. He did not know where Kenman Road was.

The glowing street signs were not much help either. One said 287th Street and the other said 72nd Avenue. Kenman Road might be anywhere.

He walked on a block or two. The streets were antiseptically clean, and he had the feeling that his boots, which had lately trod in Spacertown, were leaving dirtmarks along the street. He did not look back to see.

He looked at his wristchron. It was getting late, and Kenman Road might be anywhere. He turned into a busy thoroughfare, conscious that he was attracting attention. The streets here were crowded with little people who barely reached his chest; they were all about the same height, and most of them looked alike. A few had had radical surgical alterations, and every one of these was different. One had a unicorn-like horn; another, an extra eye which cunningly resembled his real ones. The Earthers were looking at him furtively, as they would at a tiger or an elephant strolling down a main street.

"Where are you going, Spacer?" said a voice from the middle of the street.

Rolf's first impulse was to snarl out a curse and keep moving, but he realized that the question was a good one and one whose answer he was trying to find out for himself. He turned.

Another policeman stood on

the edge of the walkway. "Are you lost?" The policeman was short and delicate-looking.

Rolf produced his card.

The policeman studied it. "What business do you have with Quinton?"

"Just tell me how to get there," Rolf said. "I'm in a hurry."

The policeman backed up a step. "All right, take it easy." He pointed to a kiosk. "Take the subcar here. There's a stop at Kenman Road. You can find your way from there."

"I'd rather walk it," Rolf said. He did not want to have to stand the strain of riding in a subcar with a bunch of curious staring Earthers.

"Fine with me," the policeman said. "It's about two hundred blocks to the north. Got a good pair of legs?"

"Never mind," Rolf said. "I'll take the subcar."

Kenman Road was a quiet little street in an expensive-looking end of Yawk. 12406 was a towering building which completely overshadowed everything else on the street. As Rolf entered the door, a perfumed little Earther with a flashing diamond where his left eye should have been and a skin stained bright

purple appeared from nowhere.

"We've been waiting for you. Come on; Kal will be delighted that you're here."

The elevator zoomed up so quickly that Rolf thought for a moment that he was back in space. But it stooped suddenly at the 62nd floor, and, as the door swung open, the sounds of wild revelry drifted down the hall. Rolf had a brief moment of doubt when he pictured Laney and Kana-day at this very moment, playing cards in their mouldering hovel while he walked down this plastiline corridor back into a world he had left behind.

Quinton came out into the hall to greet him. Rolf recognized him by the missing ears; his skin was now a subdued blue to go with his orange robe.

"I'm so glad you came," the little Earther bubbled. "Come on in and I'll introduce you to everyone."

The door opened photoelectrically as they approached. Quinton seized him by the hand and dragged him in. There was the sound of laughter and of shouting. As he entered it all stopped, suddenly, as if it had been shut off. Rolf stared at them quizzically from under his lowering

brows, and they looked at him with ill-concealed curiosity.

They seemed divided into two groups. Clustered at one end of the long hall was a group of Earthers who seemed completely identical, all with the same features, looking like so many dolls in a row. These were the Earthers he remembered, the ones whom the plastic surgeons had hacked at and hewn until they all conformed to the prevailing concept of beauty.

Then at the other end was a different group. They were all different. Some had glittering jewels set in their foreheads, others had no lips, no hair, extra eyes, three nostrils. They were a weird and frightening group, highest product of the plastic surgeon's art.

Both groups were staring silently at Rolf.

"Friends, this is Rolf—Rolf—"

"Dekker," Rolf said after a pause. He had almost forgotten his own last name.

"Rolf Dekker, just back from outer space. I've invited him to join us tonight. I think you'll enjoy meeting him."

The stony silence slowly dissolved into murmurs of polite conversation as the party-goers adjusted to the presence of the newcomer.

They seemed to be discussing the matter earnestly among themselves, as if Quinton had done something unheard-of by bringing a Spacer into an Earther party.

A tall girl with blonde hair drifted up to him.

"Ah. Jonne," Quinton said. He turned to Rolf. "This is Jonne. She asked to be your companion at the party. She's very interested in space and things connected with it."

Things connected with it, Rolf thought. Meaning me. He looked at her. She was as tall an Earther as he had yet seen, and probably suffered for it when there were no Spacers around. Furthermore, he suspected, her height was accentuated for the evening by special shoes. She was not of the Individ persuasion, because her face was well-shaped, with smooth, even features, with no individualist distortion. Her skin was unstained. She wore a clinging off-the-breast tunic. Quite a dish, Rolf decided. He began to see that he might enjoy this party.

The other guests began to approach timidly, now that the initial shock of his presence had worn off. They asked silly little questions about space—questions which show-

ed that they had only a superficial interest in him and were treating him as a sort of talking dog. He answered as many as he could, looking down at their little painted faces with concealed contempt.

They think as little of me as I do of them. The thought hit him suddenly and his broad face creased in a smile at the irony. Then the music started.

The knot of Earthers slowly broke up and drifted away to dance. He looked at Jonne, who had stood patiently at his side through all this.

"I don't dance," he said. "I never learned how." He watched the other couples moving gracefully around the floor, looking for all the world like an assemblage of puppets. He stared in the dim light, watching the couples clinging to each other as they rocked through the motions of the dance. He stood against the wall, wearing his ugliness like a shield. He saw the great gulf which separated him from the Earthers spreading before him, as he watched the dancers and the gay chatter and the empty badinage and the furtive hand-holding, and everything else from which he was cut off. The bizarre Indi-

vids were dancing together—he noticed one man putting an extra arm to full advantage—and the almost identical Conforms had formed their own group again. Rolf wondered how they told each other apart when they all looked alike.

"Come on," Jonne said. "I'll show you how to dance." He turned to look at her, with her glossy blonde hair and even features. She smiled prettily, revealing white teeth. *Probably newly purchased?* Rolf wondered.

"Actually I do know how to dance," Rolf said. "But I do it so badly—"

"That doesn't matter," she said gaily. "Come on."

She took his arm. Maybe she doesn't think I look like an ape, he thought. She doesn't treat me the way the others do. But why am I so ugly, and why is she so pretty?

He looked at her and she looked at him, and he felt her glance on his stubbly face with its ferocious teeth and burning yellowish eyes. He didn't want her to see him at all; he wished he had no face.

He folded her in his arms, feeling her warmth radiate through him. She was very tall, he realized, almost as tall as a Spacer woman—but with

none of the harsh ruggedness of the women of Spacertown. They danced, she well, he clumsily. When the music stopped she guided him to the entrance of a veranda.

They walked outside into the cool night air. The lights of the city obscured most of the stars, but a few still showed, and the moon hung high above Yawk. He could dimly make out the lights of Spacertown across the river, and he thought again of Laney and Kanaday and wished Kanaday could see him now with this beautiful Earther next to him.

"You must get lonely in space," she said after a while.

"I do," he said, trying to keep his voice gentle. "But it's where I belong. I'm bred for it."

She nodded. "Yes. And any of those so-called men inside would give ten years of his life to be able to go to space. But yet you say it's lonely."

"Those long rides through the night," he said. "They get you down. You want to be back among people. So you come back. You come back. And what do you come back to?"

"I know," she said softly. "I've seen Spacertown."

"Why must it be that way?"

he demanded. "Why are Spacers so lucky and so wretched all at once?"

"Let's not talk about it now," she said.

I'd like to kiss her, he thought. But my face is rough, and I'm rough and ugly, and she'd push me away. I remember the pretty little Earther girls who ran laughing away from me when I was thirteen and fourteen, before I went to space.

"You don't have to be lonely," she said. One of her perfect eyebrows lifted just a little. "Maybe someday you'll find someone who cares. Rolf. Someday, maybe."

"Yeah," he said. "Someday, maybe." But he knew it was all wrong. Could he bring this girl to Spacertown with him? No; she must be merely playing a game, looking for an evening's diversion. Something new: make love to a Spacer.

They fell silent and he watched her again, and she watched him. He heard her breath rising and falling evenly, not at all like his own thick gasps. After a while he stepped close to her, put his arm around her, tilted her head into the crook of his elbow, bent, and kissed her.

As he did it, he saw he was botching it just like every-

thing else. He had come too close, and his heavy boot was pressing on the tip of her shoe; and he had not quite landed square on her lips. But still, he was close to her. He was reluctant to break it up, but he felt she was only half-responding, not giving anything of herself while he had given all. He drew back a step.

She did not have time to hide the expression of distaste that involuntarily crossed her face. He watched the expression on her face as she realized the kiss was over. He watched her silently.

"Someday, maybe," he said. She stared at him, not hiding the fear that was starting to grow on her face.

He felt a cold chill deep in his stomach, and it grew until it passed through his throat and into his head.

"Yeah," he said. "Someday, maybe. But not you. Not anyone who's just playing games. That's all—you want something to tell your friends about, that's why you volunteered for tonight's assignment. It's all you can do to keep from laughing at me, but you're sticking to it. I don't want any of it, hear me? Get away."

She stepped back a pace. "You ugly, clumsy clown. You ape!" Tears began to

spoil the flawless mask of her face. Blinded with anger, he grabbed roughly for her arm, but she broke away and dashed back inside.

She was trying to collect me, he thought. Her hobby: interesting dates. She wanted to add me to her collection. An Experience. Calmly he walked to the end of the veranda and stared off into the night, choking his rage. He watched the moon making its dead ride across the sky, and stared at the sprinkling of stars. The night was empty and cold, he thought, finally. But not more so than I.

He turned and looked back through the half-opened window. He saw a girl who looked almost like her, but was not tall enough and wore a different dress. Then he spotted her. She was dancing with one of the Conforms, a frail-looking man a few inches shorter than she, with regular, handsome features. She laughed at some sly joke, and he laughed with her.

Rolf watched the moon for a moment more, thinking of Laney's warning. *They just want to make fun of you. Look at the big ape, they'll say.*

He knew he had to get out of there immediately. He was

a Spacer, and they were Earthers, and he scorned them for being contemptuous little dolls, and they laughed at him for being a hulking ape. He was not a member of their species; he was not part of their world.

He went inside. Kal Quinton came rushing up to him.

"I'm going," Rolf said.

"What? You don't mean that," the little man said. "Why, the party's scarcely gotten under way, and there are dozens of people who want to meet you. And you'll miss the big show if you don't stay."

"I've already seen the big show," Rolf told him. "I want out. Now."

"You can't leave now," Quinton said. Rolf thought he saw tears in the corners of the little man's eyes. "Please don't leave. I've told everyone you'd be here—you'll disgrace me."

"What do I care? Let me out of here." Rolf started to move toward the door. Quinton attempted to push him back.

"Just a minute, Rolf. Please!"

"I have to get out," he said. He knocked Quinton out of his way with a backhand swipe of his arm and dashed down the hall frantically, looking for the elevator.

Laney and Kanaday were sitting up waiting for him when he got back, early in the morning. He slung himself into a pneumochair and unsealed his boots, releasing his cramped, tired feet.

"Well," Laney asked. "How was the party?"

"You have fun among the Earthers, Rolf?"

He said nothing.

"It couldn't have been that bad," Laney said.

Rolf looked up at her. "I'm leaving space. I'm going to go to a surgeon and have him turn me into an Earther. I hate this filthy life!"

"He's drunk," Kanaday said.

"No, I'm not drunk," Rolf retorted. "I don't want to be an ape any more."

"Is that what you are? If you're an ape, what are they to you? Monkeys?" Kanaday laughed harshly.

"Are they really so wonderful?" Laney asked. "Does the life appeal to you so much that you'll give up space for it? Do you admire the Earthers so much?"

She's got me, Rolf thought. I hate Spacertown, but will I like Yawk any better? Do I really want to become one of those little puppets? But there's nothing left in space

for me. At least the Earthers are happy.

I wish she wouldn't look at me that way. "Leave me alone," he snarled. "I'll do whatever I want to do." Laney was staring at him, trying to poke behind his mask of anger. He looked at her wide shoulders, her muscular frame, her unbeautiful hair and rugged face, and compared it with Jonne's clinging grace, her flowing gold hair.

He picked up his boots and stumped up to bed.

The surgeon's name was Goldring, and he was a wiry, intense man who had prevailed on one of his colleagues to give him a tiny slit of a mouth. He sat behind a shining plastiline desk, waiting patiently until Rolf finished talking.

"It can't be done," he said at last. "Plastic surgeons can do almost anything, but I can't turn you into an Earther. It's not just a matter of chopping eight or ten inches out of your legs; I'd have to alter your entire bone structure or you'd be a hideous misproportioned monstrosity. And it can't be done. I can't build you a whole new body from scratch, and if I could do it you wouldn't be able to afford it."

Rolf stamped his foot impatiently. "You're the third surgeon who's given me the same line. What is this—a conspiracy? I see what you can do. If you can graft a third arm onto somebody, you can turn me into an Earther."

"Please, Mr. Dekker. I've told you I can't. But I don't understand why you want such a change. Hardly a week goes by without some Yawk boy coming to me and asking to be turned into a Spacer, and I have to refuse him for the same reasons I'm refusing you! That's the usual course of events — the romantic Earther boy wanting to go to space, and not being able to."

An idea hit Rolf. "Was one of them Kal Quinton?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dekker. I just can't divulge any such information."

Rolf shot his arm across the desk and grasped the surgeon by the throat. "Answer me!"

"Yes," the surgeon gasped. "Quinton asked me for such an operation. Almost everyone wants one."

"And you can't do it?" Rolf asked.

"Of course not. I've told you: the amount of work needed to turn Earther into Spacer or Spacer into Earther is inconceivable. It'll never be done."

"I guess that's definite, then," Rolf said, slumping a little in disappointment. "But there's nothing to prevent you from giving me a new face—from taking away this face and replacing it with something people can look at without shuddering."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Dekker," the surgeon said.

"I know that! Can't you see it—I'm *ugly*! Why? Why should I look this way?"

"Please calm down, Mr. Dekker. You don't seem to realize that you're a perfectly normal-looking Spacer. *You were bred to look this way.* It's your genetic heritage. Space is not a thing for everyone; only men with extraordinary bone structure can withstand acceleration. The first men were carefully selected and bred. You see the result of five centuries of this sort of breeding. The sturdy, heavy-boned Spacers — you, Mr. Dekker, and your friends — are the only ones who are fit to travel in space. The others, the weaklings like myself, the little people, resort to plastic surgery to compensate for their deficiency. For a while the trend was to have everyone conform to a certain standard of beauty; if we couldn't be strong, we could

at least be handsome. Lately a new theory of individualism has sprung up, and now we strive for original forms in our bodies. This is all because size and strength has been bred out of us and given to you."

"I know all this," Rolf said. "Why can't you—"

"Why can't I peel away your natural face and make you look like an Earther? There's no reason why; it would be a simple operation. But who would you fool? Why can't you be grateful for what you are? You can go to Mars, while we can merely look at it. If I gave you a new face, it would cut you off from both sides. The Earthers would still know you were a Spacer, and I'm sure the other Spacers would immediately cease to associate with you."

"Who are you to say? You're not supposed to pass judgment on whether an operation should be performed, or you wouldn't pull out people's eyes and stick diamonds in!"

"It's not that, Mr. Dekker." The surgeon folded and unfolded his hands in impatience. "You must realize that you are what you are. Your appearance is a social norm, and for acceptance in your social environment you must

continue to appear, well, perhaps, shall I say apelike?"

It was as bad a word as the surgeon could have chosen.

"Ape! Ape, am I! I'll show you who's an ape!" Rolf yelled, all the accumulated frustration of the last two days suddenly bursting loose. He leaped up and overturned the desk. Dr. Goldring hastily jumped backwards as the heavy desk crashed to the floor. A startled nurse dashed into the office, saw the situation, and immediately ran out.

"Give me your instruments! I'll operate on myself!" He knocked Goldring against the wall, pulled down a costly solidograph from the wall and kicked it at him, and crashed through into the operating room, where he began overturning tables and heaving chairs through glass shelves.

"I'll show you," he said. He cracked an instrument case and took out a delicate knife with a near-microscopic edge. He bent it in half and threw the crumpled wreckage away. Wildly he destroyed everything he could, raging from one end of the room to the other, ripping down furnishings, smashing, destroying, while Dr. Goldring stood at the door and yelled for help.

It was not long in coming. An army of Earther police-

men erupted into the room and confronted him as he stood panting amid the wreckage. They were all short men, but there must have been twenty of them.

"Don't shoot him," someone called. And then they advanced in a body.

He picked up the operating table and hurled it at them. Three policemen crumpled under it, but the rest kept coming. He batted them away like insects, but they surrounded him and piled on. For a few moments he struggled under the load of fifteen small men, punching and kicking and yelling. He burst loose for an instant, but two of them were clinging to his legs and he hit the floor with a crash. They were on him immediately, and he stopped struggling after a while.

The next thing he knew he was lying sprawled on the floor of his room in Spacertown, breathing dust out of the tattered carpet. He was a mass of cuts and bruises, and he knew they must have given him quite a going-over. He was sore from head to foot.

So they hadn't arrested him. No, of course not; no more than they would arrest any wild animal who went berserk. They had just dump-

ed him back in the jungle. He tried to get up, but couldn't make it. Quite a going-over it must have been. Nothing seemed broken, but everything was slightly bent.

"Satisfied now?" said a voice from somewhere. It was a pleasant sound to hear, a voice, and he let the mere noise of it soak into his mind. "Now that you've proved to everyone that you really are just an ape?"

He twisted his neck around—slowly, because his neck was stiff and sore. Laney was sitting on the edge of his bed with two suitcases next to her.

"It really wasn't necessary to run wild there," she said. "The Earthers all knew you were just an animal anyway. You didn't have to prove it so violently."

"Okay, Laney. Quit it."

"If you want me to. I just wanted to make sure you knew what had happened. A gang of Earther cops brought you back a while ago and dumped you here. They told me the story."

"Leave me alone."

"You've been telling everyone that all along, Rolf. Look where it got you. A royal beating at the hands of a bunch of Earthers. Now that they've thrown you out for the last time, has it filtered into your

mind that this is where you belong?"

"In Spacertown?"

"Only between trips. You belong in space, Rolf. No surgeon can make you an Earther. The Earthers are dead, but they don't know it yet. All their parties, their fancy clothes, their extra arms and missing ears—that means they're decadent. They're finished. You're the one who's alive; the whole universe is waiting for you to go out and step on its neck. And instead you want to turn yourself into a greenskinned little monkey! Why?"

He pulled himself to a sitting position. "I don't know," he said. "I've been all mixed up, I think." He felt his powerful arm. "I'm a Spacer." Suddenly he glanced at her. "What are the suitcases for?" he said.

"I'm moving in," Laney said. "I need a place to sleep."

"What's the matter with Kanaday? Did he get tired of listening to you preaching? He's my friend, Laney; I'm not going to do him dirt."

"He's dead, Rolf. When the Earther cops came here to bring you back, and he saw what they did to you, his hatred overflowed. He always hated Earthers, and he hated

them even more for the way you were being tricked into thinking they were worth anything. He got hold of one of those cops and just about twisted him into two pieces. They blasted him."

Rolf was silent. He let his head sink down on his knees.

"So I moved down here. It's lonely upstairs now. Come on; I'll help you get up."

She walked toward him, hooked her hand under his arm, and half-dragged, half-pushed him to his feet. Her touch was firm, and there was no denying the strength behind her.

"I have to get fixed up," he said abruptly. "My leave's up in two days. I have to get out of here. We're shipping for Pluto."

He rocked unsteadily on his feet. "It'll really get lonely here then," he said.

"Are you really going to go? Or are you going to find some jack-surgeon who'll make your face pretty for a few dirty credits?"

"Stop it. I mean it. I'm going. I'll be gone a year on this signup. By then I'll have enough cash piled up on various planets to be a rich man. I'll get it all together and get a mansion on Venus, and have Greenie slaves."

It was getting toward noon. The sun, high in the sky, burst through the shutters and lit up the dingy room.

"I'll stay here," Laney said. "You're going to Pluto?"

He nodded.

"Kanaday was supposed to be going to Pluto. He was heading there when that explosion finished his foot. He never got there after that."

"Poor old Kanaday," Rolf said.

"I'll miss him too. I guess I'll have to run the boarding-house now. For a while. Will you come back here when your year's up?"

"I suppose so," Rolf said without looking up. "This town is no worse than any of the other Spacertowns. No better, but no worse." He slowly lifted his head and looked at her as she stood there facing him.

"I hope you come back," she said.

The sun was coming in from behind her, now, and lighting her up. She was rugged, all right, and strong: a good hard worker. And she was well built. Suddenly his aches became less painful, as he looked at her and realized that she was infinitely more beautiful than the slick, glossy-looking girl he had kissed on the veranda, who

had bought her teeth at a store and had gotten her figure from a surgeon. Laney, at least, was real.

"You know," he said at last, "I think I have an idea. You wait here and I'll come get you when my year's up. I'll have enough to pay passage to Venus for two. We can get a slightly smaller mansion than I planned on getting. But we can get it. Some parts of Venus are beautiful. And the closest those monkeys from

Yawk can get to it is to look at it in the night sky. You think it's a good idea?"

"I think it's a great idea," she said, moving toward him. Her head was nearly as high as his own.

"I'll go back to space. I have to, to keep my rating. But you'll wait for me, won't you?"

"I'll wait."

And as he drew her close, he knew she meant it.

THE END



"We interrupt this program to bring you an important bulletin!"

HOLE IN THE AIR

At exactly the time Derke Berish realized he was about to lose everything, a small boy showed the sure way to save it. All you had to do, it seemed, was to find a hole in the air, climb through and help yourself to fame and fortune. Worked fine too...until Derke found out that he wasn't the only one fond of fame and fortune!

IT HAD been a bad day for Derke Berish. First had come Kanner's memorandum, implying in veiled terms that Berish was doing a pretty feeble job these days, and immediately after that Production Chief Sunetaro had rejected Berish's sphincter fountain-pen design on the grounds that it was cumbersome and had little sales appeal.

Berish slouched glumly behind his black, shabby designing desk and idly toyed with the two slips of paper: Kanner's harsh white one, Sunetaro's gentler green. Kanner's with its sedate mes-

sage typed in dark brown, neat inch-wide margins all around, and Sunetaro's scribbled in the Production Chief's near-cunieforn. They both added up to the same thing: Berish was in a slump, and unless he could regain the touch that had brought forth gadget after gadget for years, Amalgamated Technologicals would have a new design chief and Berish would be scouting the employment shy-sters again.

His gaze wandered over the busy little office. His three assistants were all bent over their designing-boards, munching on their stylos and



Not only was he climbing into thin air—he was disappearing in it!

concentrating fiercely. Berish wondered which of them would eventually replace him—little rumped Rodriguez, or Condon, or Hellman? They were all clever, eager, bright-eyed, just as Berish had been when he first came to work for Amalgamated Technologicals.

As he sickly surveyed the office, he saw Condon leave his desk and move toward him. "Thought you might be interested in this," said Condon, putting a large marble down before him. Even in his gloom Berish admired the marble's beauty. It gleamed with a soft, soothing light, and right in its heart burnt a hard, bright little flame. It seemed almost like a precious gem.

"My boy found it yesterday," Condon said, with that too-eager smile of the underling who wants to move up. "Really interesting gimmick, sir."

Berish fondled the marble for a moment and looked up slowly at Condon. He felt terribly tired; all the weight of the world seemed to have been lowered onto his thin shoulders this bleak morning.

"It's very pretty, Mr. Condon," Berish said. "I admire your taste in marbles." He

yawned. "But just why should I—"

Bag-eyed old has-been!

Abruptly Berish awoke. "What was that, Mr. Condon?"

"What, sir?" said Condon, turning fish-white.

"Repeat what you just said to me, Condon."

"But I didn't say anything, sir. This marble—"

Berish slumped back in the chair. Now I'm starting to come apart at the seams, he thought. Hearing things is just about the end. I'll cashier out at 1700.

"Go ahead," Berish snapped. "Tell me about the marble."

I would if you'd let me.

"Didn't you just say, 'I would if you'd let me'?" Berish asked.

"No, sir, but it was in my mind," Condon said. "That's the thing about this marble. It transmits thoughts."

Berish let the marble drop as if it were a glowing coal, and it rolled along the desk. It came to a rest next to Sune-taro's note. He looked at it, entranced by its glowing radiance.

"Just where did you get this thing, Mr. Condon?" Berish asked after he had calmed down.

"You may not believe this, Mr. Berish," Condon began, "but my son claims he found it in another dimension."

It had been a bad day for Berish, all right. First Kanner, then Sunetaro, now a telepathic marble from another dimension. He stared blankly at the balding head of Hellman, still bent over his designing-board, and then turned his gaze up coldly at Condon. The young design assistant looked back at him calmly.

"You say your boy got it from another dimension, Condon? He didn't merely fly to Mars for it?"

"Please, Mr. Berish," Condon said, a trifle wearily. "I know it sounds fantastic. But where he got it doesn't matter, does it? The fact remains that we have it, and it has definite commercial possibilities."

Berish's eye flickered toward Kanner's polite note still before him, and at the marble. Yes, yes, of course, Berish thought, picking up the marble again and watching the hypnotic dancing of the dot of fire in its heart. Definite commercial possibilities. He felt the bleakness starting to lift.

"Think something at me, Mr. Condon."

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

"The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog?"

Condon nodded.

Berish weighed the marble in the palm of his hand. "This could be something exciting," he said, thinking of Kanner and Sunetaro and the whole faceless management of Amalgamated Technologicals to whom he was nothing more than a machine for designing gadgets, to be cast off and replaced when worn out. This was quite a gadget, all right. And perhaps there would be more where this one came from. With a little shrewdness—

"I didn't know what to say at first," Condon said. "Nine-year-old boys have a way of vanishing at mealtimes, and when I went out to get him I couldn't find him. Yesterday, around 1800. My wife doesn't like dinner time to be too late. But I looked all over for Ronnie, and there was no sign of him. He always tells us if he's leaving the block. I started over next door to see if he was playing indoors, when suddenly he tumbled out of what I can only describe, sir, as a hole in the air—"

"—and he was holding this marble clutched in his grimy

little paw. I see the picture, Mr. Condon." Berish looked down at the marble, then querulously up at Condon. "Think something at me, Mr. Condon." He grasped the marble.

This is the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"Is it, Condon?"

"All I can tell you is what Ronnie said," replied Condon. "He said he had walked into a hole in the air and came across some alien monsters playing marbles. He sat right down with them and won this marble."

Berish smiled. "And you believe this? That a small boy would play marbles so fearlessly with alien monsters? If I'd been there—or you, or anyone—I'd have run away."

"But not Ronnie," Condon said. "He's been raised on TV; I can't keep him away from the set. He's more at home in outer space and alien dimensions than he is in his own house."

"Ah, then. What we have here is nothing but the workings of a young boy's fertile imagination."

"Quite possibly," said Condon. "But that still doesn't account for this," he said, reaching out and tapping the marble.

"No," said Berish. "It

doesn't," he added reflectively. "I think I'll come home with you tonight, if you don't mind. I'd like to have a chat with your son. This may prove to be very, very profitable for us all, Condon."

Four hours later Berish was comfortably enfolded by an immense armchair in Condon's neat little suburban home, facing a wiry, brown-haired, freckle-faced little boy.

"Let's go over this slowly, Ronnie," Berish said, struggling to calm his frayed nerves. "You say you saw a hole in the air."

"That's right," Ronnie said. "I twisted myself around and *scrunched* and I went through."

"I see," said Berish. "You *scrunched*. I've got the idea of it. Have a popstick?"

"Not before supper," broke in Condon, as Ronnie reached eagerly for the proffered sweet. Berish shook his head and put the popstick back in its wrapper.

"Tell me what you saw there, Ronnie."

The boy's eyes widened. "When I got there I was by a big tree and there were five aliens around a ring and they were about so high, with lots of arms and purple and green

scales, and they live in a big world with nothing but trees and white concrete and no houses or cars or grownups or anything, and I got there through this hole in the air next door. They were playing marbles, just like we do here, except there wasn't anyone to play with the other morning or I wouldn't have gone through the hole in the air." Ronnie caught in his breath sharply.

Berish closed his eyes for a moment and gathered in his thoughts. No matter how much fibbing Ronnie was doing, the marble did come from some place. And if Ronnie's story were true, if there were a universe next door overflowing with wonders, he, Derke Berish, held the key.

The key was a small boy's curiosity. A nine-year-old is curious about all things: about frogs and eels and stun-ball averages and rocket ships and certainly doubly curious about a strange world on the other side of a hole in the air. If Ronnie could be persuaded to go back through, again and again—

"You got the marble over there?" Berish asked.

"Yessir. I made contact with them the way Captain Space does, and they let me join their game when they

saw I was a peaceful—uh—entity, and I won the marble and brought it back and gave it to Dad and I was late for supper."

Berish glanced at Condon, who sat to one side, impassively. "How would you like to take me outside and show me where the hole in the air is, Ronnie?" Berish asked.

"Why don't you wait until after supper?" Condon said. "My wife will have things ready any minute."

"Tell her to wait a moment, will you, Condon? This is pretty important. Come on, Ronnie." *Here I come*, Berish thought.

Berish muffled Condon's protest with a gesture of a hand. Ronnie led Berish outside into the alleyway that separated the Condon house from the one next to it. Berish watched anxiously as Ronnie wandered up and down the alleyway, searching in the gathering dusk. Abruptly he brightened. "Here it is, Mr. Berish!" he called. He pointed up. "There."

Berish squinted. "I don't see anything," he said, and got the sickly suspicion that he was the victim of a wild, purposeless hoax. "Show me."

Ronnie outlined a space

about three feet high. "It shimmers, like. It's hard to tell in the dark, but this is the place."

Berish contemplated it for a moment. "Ronnie?"

"Yessir?"

"Your father's not looking. Here's the popstick."

"But he said—"

"Never mind. Would you show me how you go through the hole in the air?"

"You mean you want me to go through? Right now?"

"Yes," Berish said, trying to look like a kindly uncle. "And when you go through—I'd like you to try to find the aliens again, and make them give you some other toy of theirs."

"You mean you want another marble, Mr. Berish?"

"Yes—no," he said patiently. "Not another marble, just yet. Any other kind of toy. All right?" He gave Ronnie what he hoped was a jolly nudge. The boy peered into the dimness for a moment, then bent down—*scrunched*—and, slowly straightening from his contorted position, stepped through. Berish thought he caught a glimpse of a wide, spreading ocean of white sand, broken here and there by a few tall, grotesque trees outlined against a lemon-yellow sky, and then Ron-

nie vanished and the gateway closed over.

"Where's Ronnie?" Condon demanded, bursting out of the house.

"It was true, Berish said, ignoring him.

"What was true? Do you mean you've sent him back again? Why, we don't know what might be back there. Ferocious alien monsters, anything at all—and you let him go through!"

Berish ignored Condon's anxious exclamations. He was dreamily contemplating the hole in the air, wondering what marvels would come forth to be placed before the astonished eyes of Kanner and Sunetaro and the high forces of Amalgamated Technologicals.

"Berish!" Condon finally shouted. The shout reminded Berish both that Condon was present and that he was an underling who had no business shouting, and he turned to face him.

"Please, Condon. Your boy won't be in any danger, and he'll be right back. This may mean great things for us, Condon."

"Great things! What about my son?"

"Here he is," Berish said. Ronnie stepped back through

the hole and tumbled down at Berish's feet. Berish lifted him up.

He had brought back a top—a child's spinning top, off-green with dark blue dots. Berish wondered wildly if the aliens had used polka-dot paint to paint it, and then he seized the toy from Ronnie and examined it with frantic curiosity.

He put it on the ground and spun it, gently. It wobbled around and keeled over.

"No, Mr. Berish. You've got to give it a good twist," Ronnie said, bending down in the growing dusk. He took the top, his small, dirty fingers barely able to grip it, and started it off with a flick of his wrist.

It rose about five feet off the ground and hovered there, floating lightly and easily.

It was inevitable, Berish thought, that Condon would try to monkey-wrench the whole thing. Miracles never happened smoothly.

"Look here," Berish said. "We have a whole alien universe opening up before us—a complete immense new technology. The first two things we've brought back from there have given us telepathic contact and now antigravity. There's no telling

what further treasures can come through the gateway."

"Exactly," said Condon. "And that's why we should turn the whole business over to the government and let them explore this other universe."

"Why can't you understand?" said Berish, mustering his patience. "You and I are employees of Amalgamated Technologicals. And there is money in these two gadgets for Amalgamated Technologicals, and that means there's money for us. If we turn this over to the government, they'll grab the antigrav top and the marble and turn them into federal monopolies. Just watch. You want to earn seventy credits a week for the rest of your life?"

"Mr. Berish is right, Ralph," said Condon's wife. Startled at aid coming from an unexpected quarter, Berish whirled to look at her, seeing her almost for the first time. "We could let Ronnie go through a couple of more times, and that'll be enough. We'll all be rich."

"And suppose something happens to him?" Condon said.

"Don't worry, Dad," said Ronnie. "They're very nice, even if they're so funny-look-

ing with all those arms and that one big eye. And they use those marbles to speak. The one I spoke to gave me the top and said something about exchanging."

"Exchange?"

"Uh-huh," Ronnie said. "I forget what he told me—something about being very anxious to exchange."

"There you are," exclaimed Berish triumphantly. "We've opened negotiations already!" He cleared his throat nervously, and plunged on. "I don't think there's need for any further discussion. It's established that Ronnie's the only one who can fit through that hole—or even find it, for that matter—and it is established that the aliens are friendly and anxious to exchange important things with us, through the medium of Ronnie. It would be an act of criminal negligence to fail to take advantage of this opportunity for contact with another race."

"And why let the federal government take all the profit when we can use the money?" demanded Mrs. Condon happily.

"But suppose—what if—"

"Those people are nice, Dad."

"Might I add, Mr. Condon, that should you insist on

turning this discovery over to the government, Amalgamated Technologicals might not appreciate such an action?"

Condon nodded weakly, and Berish smiled. It was a smile of victory. He could almost hear the trumpets in the background.

"Are you ready for your trip—ah, next door, Ronnie?"

Ronnie held a small portable generator firmly in both hands. Berish had been quite pleased with himself for making the suggestion that perhaps the aliens might never have discovered electricity. Perhaps, Berish hazarded, they had made use of some other power source from the start—mental power, perhaps—and had never been provoked into controlling electricity. The generator might open up new worlds of technological advance for the aliens, and who knew what they might give in their gratitude?

Berish had gone over Ronnie's instructions patiently. "You want me to find an alien and explain that this is an exchange sent by Earth and get something from him in return."

"Exactly!" Berish said. "You have a very intelligent son, do you know?" he said,

turning to Condon, who stood by nervously.

"Come back quickly," Condon said. "I wish you wouldn't make him do this."

"We've been through this before," Berish said coldly.

"Suppose something happens to him? You're letting a youngster go exploring an unknown universe—"

"Will you be quiet?" Berish snapped. "I've had enough of your worries, Condon. Go inside. I'll call you when Ronnie comes back."

Berish waited anxiously for fifteen minutes, and found himself getting a little worried too. Ronnie was certainly a bright, attractive little boy, and he couldn't blame Condon for worrying about him. He paced up and down the alleyway.

At last Ronnie returned. Berish stared, wondering what he had brought back.

Ronnie held out a small globe in which a bizarre black fishlike animal paddled sedately back and forth in a green, brackish-looking liquid.

"How nice," Berish said, concealing his sharp disappointment. "A pet." Inwardly he raged; an animal was of no use to him.

Condon appeared, and look-

ed at the animal. "Doesn't seem like we've profited much this time," he said. "I guess you'll send him back for something else."

Berish stood quietly in thought. "Ronnie," he said, "go back. Tell your friend to widen the gateway, if he can. Big enough for a grown-up."

Ronnie turned, *scrunched*, went through. A moment later he stepped out.

"It's all right, Mr. Berish," he said. "Lennid widened it. And they're looking forward to an exchange."

Berish's eyes brightened. Here, he thought, here's the chance to go through and handle things myself. No more clumsy dealing through a little boy; I'll go straight to the source and pick out the best they've got.

He let his mind dwell on the possible treasures of the world next door. Time travel? Transmutation? Teleportation? Whatever they had, he'd figure out some sort of exchange and get it from them, without manipulating at long range through Ronnie. That was too inefficient, he thought, looking at the fish-bowl.

If they have anti-gravity and telepathy, Berish reflected, they can have anything

else. And I'll get it from them. I'll exchange. For the mutual benefit of the world next door and Earth. For the mutual benefit of Amalgamated Technologicals and Derke Berish.

"I'm going through," he said, and did.

Ronnie and Condon waited patiently in the alleyway for Berish's return, as an hour passed, then two. They kept a constant vigil for the rest of the day and finally, late in the evening, a figure stepped through the gateway.

"Here he is!" cried Ronnie. But it was not Berish. It was purple-green in color, had a dozen undulating arms, a single big eye at the top of its body, and a tight slit of a mouth under the eye. In one arm it held outstretched one of the otherworld marbles.

Greetings, came its thought.

Condon stared at the alien in horror.

I am your exchange, the alien projected. We have received your specimen, and we joy in his complexity. He has been an object of much interest. I have been selected in reciprocation.

"Welcome," Condon said, backing up a bit, wondering what had happened to Berish. "You're in exchange? For Berish?"

Yes. And I am, like him, an exceptionally curious person. For this reason, I ask that you grant me the same favor which my people granted him.

"What's that?" Condon said.

The single big eye of the alien gleamed. *That, before you dissect me, you allow me to see some of your world,* the thought came.

THE END

Look Homeward, Spaceman

Fine thing! When a man spends six long years away from his hearthside—roaming the far reaches of outer space—and then returns home to find that even his mother didn't know he'd gone beyond the front gate!

I GUESS this is the street, Paul thought. *I'm back.* It annoyed him that after six years in space he was no longer quite sure where his home was.

But this was the street, all right; the memories came flooding back. He remembered the houses of mottle-colored stone, the cracked and gnarled sidewalk, and the scraggly sycamore tree that marked his home. Not even the dawn of the space age had troubled the tree; it was still planted there firmly, leaning out at a crazy angle, with chunks of bark flaking off its side.

A pretty girl came around the corner. She was wearing softly - glowing translucent slacks, and with her was a big old Dalmatian at the end of a radioleash.

"Hi, Paul," she said, smiling.

"Hello," he said uncertainly.

He wondered how she knew him. She didn't look like much past seventeen, and so she could only have been eleven or so when he had gone away. Yet she recognized him at once.

He frowned and reached back into his memory. The Dalmatian might be the old

Reilly dog, he thought. And then the girl would be Nancy Reilly. He turned for another look at the girl's retreating figure, and chuckled. She had been just a scrawny kid playing jumprope when he left.

Paul approached his house, and noted with amusement that the old woman who lived next door was still rocking on her porch, looking placidly out at nothing particular.

"Hello, Paul," she said, as he came close. "Nice weather, isn't it?"

Shocked, he mumbled slowly, "It certainly is," and started up the steps. He didn't even remember her name—but she knew him! Something was crazy here. How had all his memories escaped him?

He mounted the familiar steps. One, two, three (slightly cracked), four, five (somewhat warped), six. The old doormat was still there.

He shuffled his feet on the doormat, as he had been taught to do long years before, and, straightening his hair, squaring his shoulders, clearing his throat, he rang the bell. He waited.

He heard the sound of someone coming to open the door. Would it be his mother or his brother? he wondered. Probably his brother Jim, he decided; Mother most likely

wasn't getting around too much any more. Once more he practiced the firm handshake he had been preparing for his brother. *I'll grab old Jim by the hand and squeeze till he yells.*

"Who's there?" called a masculine voice.

"Me. Paul. I've come back for a furlough."

Slowly the door opened.

Horrorstricken, Paul stared at the man who had opened the door, and the man inside calmly returned the glance. They stood there, frozen, looking at each other.

He was looking at himself.

Not quite himself, he decided, once the initial shock had worn off. It was a younger version of himself at the door, with narrower shoulders, a paler face (Paul was proud of his heavy space-tan). The livid white scar across Paul's forehead did not mark the brow of the other man. He was shorter, softer-looking.

"Who are you?" said the man inside the door. *His voice is gentler than mine,* Paul thought. He was still stunned, blankly uncomprehending. It was insane, unreal.

"I could ask you the same thing," he said tightly. He



He held his ground as the relentless horde advanced.

started to move inside the house, but the other Paul moved the door closed an inch or two with an imperceptible gesture.

"I'm Paul Robinson," Paul said. "I used to live here. I've been in space six years, but now I'm home. Suppose you tell me, now, what in hell's going on?"

"Pardon me," the other Paul said softly. "I'm Paul Robinson. And I've never been away at all. Now please go away before you disturb my mother."

"Your mother?" Paul gasped. "I don't know what kind of joke this is, but I've had enough of it. Get out of the way." He started to push his way past the other Paul into the house.

"Gently, kid," said a quiet voice from within. Paul stopped. This was a voice he did recognize. "Don't make a scene."

"Jim," he said. "Jim!" He turned, anxious to be near someone he knew. So far this innocent return to his home had held more terrors than his entire tour of space.

He rushed to greet his older brother, but Jim dodged around him and went to the other Paul. With a swift, sudden motion Jim touched his hand to the other Paul's back,

and the other Paul stiffened in mid-stride.

"A robot!" Paul said, astonished. "A robot copy of me!"

"Yes," said Jim, going to Paul for the first time. Paul looked at his older brother—the older brother he had grown up with, worshipped, fought with, finally left behind when the call to space came. He seized Jim's hand and shook hard.

Jim's grip wasn't what it had been. He winced and tried to struggle free, but Paul clamped tighter and tighter, glorying in his new strength.

"Uncle!" Jim cried. "Uncle!"

"At last," Paul said. He relaxed his grip and smiled broadly. "At long last I've made you yell Uncle, Jim."

Jim shrugged. "The younger generation always wins eventually, Paul. I'm afraid space has made a man out of you. How long are you going to be home?"

"I have a two-day leave," Paul said, staring strangely at the still-unexplained robot. "Then we ship out again on the Rigel run. The great wheel of interstellar commerce has decided it can dispense with this particular cog for two days."

Jim was no longer the powerful giant of Paul's memories. He had become stooped in six years, so he was no longer as tall as Paul, and his forehead was higher. And there was a loneliness in his eyes that hit Paul hard. Jim had wanted so badly to go to space—but they had, long before, decided that only one of them could go, so their mother wouldn't be left alone. Everyone thought it would be Jim to go—but Jim had waited for Paul to grow up so they could take the test together, and by then Jim's reflexes weren't what they had once been. Paul had easily outscored him.

Jim had stayed here, with his mother. Just the two of them in the old and dingy house, with the twentieth-century furniture and the old-style appliances and the ancient sycamore tree, while Paul had been to Deneb, Porcyon and the myriad other bright stars. He had thought of Jim occasionally, out in the stars, wondering how Jim was managing to fill in the lonely, empty circle of his days. The years had been hard on Jim.

"I'm having a friend drop in tomorrow for dinner before we go back to ship—Jack

Fenner, he's my bunkmate on ship. But say—" he turned to where the robot was standing frozen in the shadows, a word caught on its plastic lips. "Tell me what that thing is doing here. It was a nightmare to find *myself* answering the door."

Jim chuckled hollowly. "I bought him right after you left. It was pretty rough for a while, Paul: mother missed you terribly the first week. She became ill worrying about you."

"There was nothing about it in her letters," Paul said.

"Of course not. We'd never tell you. I wrote a lot of those letters myself. She was so sick that the doctors told me she wouldn't live unless you came back from space immediately. I didn't dare ask you to come back—I couldn't do that to my own brother—and so I had the robot double made. I told her that you were back, that your flight had been called off or something like that, and she accepted it."

"I borrowed, and I had a little put away. Back then I was thinking of marrying, and I'd saved for it. But it was my happiness against yours and Mother's, so I couldn't—you know, Paul. The girl married someone else. She's happy too."

"I see," Paul said. He sank into one of the deep, soft chairs and stared at the motionless replica of himself next to his brother. "So all these years she's thought I was right here. And that's why Nancy Reilly said hello to me and the old woman next door talked about the weather. What happens—"

"Jim!" someone called from upstairs. "Who was that at the door, Jim?"

"You'd better come down here, mother," Jim shouted. "I have a surprise for you!"

"What are you going to do?" Paul whispered. "Suppose she asks me something I don't know? Shouldn't we hide the robot?"

"No," Jim said. "This is the only way. I want her to see both of you together, so I can tell her the truth after all these years of pretending. She's well, now. She can take it."

"But what happens after I go back? Will she still be willing to accept the robot?"

"I know what I'm doing," Jim said. "Here she is."

Paul looked up as his mother appeared. "Hello, mother." He faced her, glad to see her again. She didn't look much older; she had hardly changed at all. "I'm home."

She looked at him—study-

ing the white scar on his forehead, he suspected—and then at the robot, then back at him, and finally at Jim.

"Who is this, Jim?" she asked. Her voice was as clear and as strong as it had ever been.

"This is Paul, mother. He's been in space for six years. I bought this robot right after he left, so you wouldn't miss him too much."

The shadows of the old house seemed to wrap around the three of them bleakly. "Is this true, Paul?" she said in a tight voice.

"Yes, mother." He walked around the room, getting familiar with the old things, with the smell of home and the warmth of home.

"You mean you've hoaxed me, Jim?" she demanded.

He nodded silently. "It was necessary."

The old woman considered that for a moment, and then started to laugh. "You did the right thing." She took Paul in her arms. "It's good to have you back, even if I've had you all along. You look wonderful—except—except for—"

"This?" He indicated the scar. "Got the Space Cross for that. Natives on Deneb—resisted our attempts to trade. We showed them."

"You were in a fight, Paul?"

"Yes, mother." It was as if he had been in a schoolboy tussle, not a struggle with aliens half a sky away.

As he stood there, the memory came flooding vividly back.

He was in the midst of a sweeping field of bright red vegetation, with sweat pouring off his back and making his uniform cling. The hot rays of Deneb came down.

He was standing alone, watching the wiry green men advance. His heart was pounding, but he was unafraid. It was his guard duty, and he was going to stand it. Behind him was the gleaming bulk of the great ship, and its sleeping crew.

The Denebians came closer.

"Get back," he cried roughly. They ignored him.

They were thin, humanoid men, with long, grotesque skulls and deepset, terrifying eyes. They came closer. He drew his gun and gestured with it.

Then suddenly one of them leaped, and Paul felt the nauseous alien smell near him, then around him. He jabbed upward with the gun, fired, and shoved. The corpse fell backward.

And then they were all around him, kicking, scratching, screaming furiously. Paul shouldered his way through them, took up his stand at the base of a towering *drulla*-tree, started firing into the gibbering horde. They dropped—but still kept coming.

Then the ammunition was gone, and more Denebians kept pouring from the forest. Laying about him viciously with his gunbutts, he crushed skulls and smashed alien faces with savage glee. They swarmed up and around him, and he felt a claw rip across his forehead. Blood streamed down into his eyes, and he was blind—but through the haze, he could see his crewmates coming, at last, to his rescue.

When it was over, he was a hero. And he hadn't been afraid—not half as afraid as he was back on Earth, in his own home, for no reason that he could discern. A sinister atmosphere hung over the house, and it worried him. He didn't like it. The situation made him uncomfortable.

He sat down on the staircase next to his mother, hooking one long leg over the other and pulling up his shiny Space Greys. "I have a two-day leave," he told her.

"Fine, Paul," she said quiet-

ly. "It's good to have you even for a little while."

He stood up and hugged her, gingerly, as if she were made of soap-bubbles.

"Come on. You must be hungry," she said, heading toward the kitchen. Jim followed, smiling, while the robot stayed frozen in its corner. "You know, Paul," she said, all these years I loved that machine like it was my own son. And I never knew the difference. Science is a wonderful thing, isn't it?"

Paul nodded uneasily. The substitute-idea was still too grotesque for him to take as lightly as she did.

"Where are you going when you ship out tomorrow?"

"Sirius first," he said. "By overdrive. Then to Procyon, and back to Deneb for a little cleanup action, then on to Rigel for a while." He glanced at Jim. Paul knew he was picturing those stars in his mind, seeing them by the light of his tarnished dreams. "Ought to be quite a brawl at Deneb," he said. "Oh—I'm having a bunkmate of mine here for dinner tomorrow night before we go back. He'll tell you about Deneb."

"Paul?" She was looking at him intently, nervously.

"Yes, mother?"

She paused for a moment

as if arranging her words. Then she said, "Paul, do you *have* to go back to space?"

"What?"

"I mean it, Paul. When you leave tomorrow, I'll have only the robot again. I'll know he's not real. Anyway he'll only be half of my son. I don't want the little boy always; I want the man who's been to space. Stay here with us. I'll fix up your room the way you used to have it. All your books, your records, the desk arranged the old way, even that luminous bedspread you liked. Six years in space ought to be enough."

Paul glared angrily at his brother. *Why did Jim have to tell her the truth?* Why not keep up the pretense? Did Jim do it deliberately, just to see me squirm? Maybe after all these years of self-sacrifice he wants to get back at me.

"I want you to give up space. I don't want a robot substitute any more; I want my son." Her clear blue eyes, still undimmed by age, were flecked with tears.

"You can't ask that of me," Paul said through tight lips. "It's my life out there—I can't give it up now and tie myself down on Earth. I've left Earth for good."

"Stay here for *me*, Paul."

He knotted his hands. "Not

even for you. It's not fair of you to ask me to give up everything just like that. Space is *everything* to me."

"You'll like it here, Paul. You'll forget space in a month." She was coaxing, wheedling, trying desperately to hold him back.

"I wish I hadn't come home at all," he said dully. He walked to the window. The sun was just beginning to drop in the sky, and the distant spaceport was painted a dull orange by the dying day. He looked at the silver-red ships with their noses pointed to the skies.

"Why do you want to tie me down? I don't want you to suffer, but—"

"I know," she said. "The same old story. You've always been selfish, Paul. You've let your brother make every sacrifice for you, and you've never really shown any gratitude. And you never wanted to obey me, either. My wishes meant nothing to you."

He looked from one figure to the other in anguish. Why were they torturing him? Why had this whole homecoming been such a nightmare?

"I can't let you do this to me," he snapped. He walked toward the door and quickly strode through, passing the

unconcerned robot, slamming the door hard.

He reached the porch, paused, and stared bitterly at the quiet small-town street, wondering why they were doing this to him.

It was harder to fight your mother than a whole world-full of green Denebians.

"If I had known this would happen, Paul—"

"Forget it, Jim."

"I didn't know—"

"Skip it, Jim." Paul stared coldly at his brother. "I know why you did it," he said after a moment. "You want me to stay here so you can go away somewhere, don't you? You're afraid to leave Mother alone with robot-sons, so you want to trap me into taking your place here. Well, no game. You've chosen your lot, and you've got it for keeps."

"That's not it at all," Jim said. "You don't understand. I don't want to leave home. I *can't* leave. I've bound myself hand and foot. I've lived here all my life; this house is like a shell to me by now. I'm thirty-five, Paul. I'm set in my ways now, and I can't break out. I can't tell you how much everything in this house means to me. Mother, the books, the furniture, even the robot, I can't tell you."

"Okay, skip it," Paul said roughly. "Let's eat."

Mrs. Robinson had made a lavish breakfast, all the things she remembered Paul loved, but they ate in stony silence. Paul kept his eyes on his plate and she brought him the food without saying anything. After the meal was over he quietly picked up the dishes and put them in the washer, and sat down again.

Abruptly he got up and went to his old room. He wandered around in it, getting acquainted again with the things he had loved years before, playing one of his favorite records, sitting in his favorite chair. Then he came back down.

She was puttering around, dusting and cleaning, while Jim sat quietly in a corner.

"Why don't you have an electronic duster?" he asked.

"This gives me something to do when I'm bored," she said, continuing to wipe. "What time is your bunkmate getting here?"

"Fenner? Oh, I don't know. He was in Wilmette visiting his family, and he'll probably get through here pretty soon. Blastoff is tomorrow morning at 8, but we have to be on board ship tonight, at 22 sharp."

"That means you'll have to

leave here about half-past-twenty to get to the spaceport on time," she said. She continued dusting for a while. When she considered the job finished, she put the dustcloth away.

"My room looked wonderful," Paul said. "Just the way it always did."

"I thought you'd like it," she said. "Sleep well?"

"The best. Nothing like sleeping at home after six years of spaceship cots."

"No," she said. "Nothing like it."

They were silent. The doorbell finally ended the silence when it had grown almost too tight to bear. Paul opened the door and Jack Fenner burst through.

He was a short, wiry man, smiling broadly, with thin space-tanned features and a keen-pointed nose. He wore a pair of rumpled Space Greys.

"You must be Mrs. Robinson," he said. "Gunner's always talking about you."

"Gunner?"

"Didn't he tell you? That's what we nicknamed him after the Deneb business."

"He didn't tell us much about Deneb," Jim said.

Fenner glanced at Jim. "Oh, hello. You must be Gunner's brother Jim. The one

who taught him how to use a gun."

"That's right," Jim said proudly. Paul frowned.

"You mean he didn't tell you about Deneb?" Fenner said in amazement. "First man in our ship to win a Space Cross and he didn't tell you? Why, when those Denebians came at us he held them off single-handed with two handguns until his ammo ran out, and then he used the guns as clubs till we got out to help him."

"You didn't tell me, Paul," said Mrs. Robinson accusingly.

"I didn't want to upset you."

"You mean you didn't know your son was a hero? Hell, Gunner, you weren't so modest on ship. Every time we—"

"Jack—" Paul protested.

"But you told that story from one end of space to the other—and I don't think you ever took that medal off. I'll bet you took showers with it pinned to your skin, you were so proud of it."

"So you're a hero, Paul? You didn't say much about it."

Paul deliberately ignored Jim's question and turned to Fenner. "How's your family, Jack?"

"Well, there's not very

much of it, you know. Just my aunt and my kid brother. But my brother just passed his Number One and he'll be shipping out for Centauri next month, and my aunt's going to be all alone. It's rough when you have someone in space like that, and you're all alone at home, like my aunt. Except for her cats, that is. She's got two big Persians and they're going to be like children for her now that my brother's leaving. Say, Mrs. Robinson, why don't you ring up my aunt and get together sometime? I think you'll like her."

Hastily he scribbled something on a slip of paper. "Here's her number. Mrs. Grace Fenner, over in Wilmette. Call her up sometime. She loves having guests, and she'll love having Gunner's mother especially."

"Thank you, Jack," Mrs. Robinson said. She took the slip of paper. "I'll get in touch with her. But you must be awfully hungry, Jack. Let's have dinner now and talk later."

"Fine," Fenner said. "I've been hearing about your cooking all the way from Deneb back." He followed her into the kitchen, and Paul and his brother walked in together. Jim gave Paul a light tap on

the shoulder as they entered, almost playful, almost as if it were years ago.

After the meal, with the sun well below the horizon, Fenner stood up, stretched contentedly, and said, "I hate to rush off like this, but I have one more stop before I get back to the ship. Thanks for everything, Mrs. Robinson. I sure intend to take you up on that repeat invitation next time we're down Earth. So long, Jim." He turned to Paul. "Guess I'll be seeing you at 22 aboard ship, Gunner. See you then."

"No, you won't," Paul said slowly.

"What?" Fenner whirled in a m a z e m e n t. "You're not transferring, are you?"

"No. I'm pensioning out. I've decided to stay here at home. I've had my fling in space," he said deliberately, "and now I'm going to settle down."

"You're kidding," Fenner said in a hushed voice.

Mrs. Robinson stared at Paul. "You're not going back."

"No."

"Yes," said Jim, almost in the same moment. "It's all a little joke. Paul just wanted to see what your reaction would be. He told me about this before. He's going." He

kicked Paul in the leg surreptitiously, hard, and Paul barely managed to conceal a wince. He flicked a glance at Jim. Jim was shaking his head in a way Paul understood.

"Just a little joke," Paul said thinly. "Of course I'm going back." *But I'm willing to stay*, he thought.

"Of course you're going back," said his mother. "Heroes never quit, do they? You'll have to finish the job on Deneb, and then stop by here for another couple of meals. I'll be waiting." She laughed, and Fenner was caught up by the laughter and started to chuckle.

"You'd better start packing your things," she said. "You wouldn't want to be late for blastoff." An undercurrent of mirth seemed to ripple from her, and finally Paul broke his grim mask and smiled in relief. He felt as if a weight had been lifted.

Sunup came and the ships in the far-off spaceport gleamed bright against the cloudless blue sky. Mrs. Robinson stared through the open window, squinting a little because the spaceport was so far away and hard to see in the morning light. She watched carefully, and, as the hand

of the clock reached eight, one of the ships slowly began to rise, stood for a moment on a tail of fire, and shot up out of sight.

She turned. Jim was standing behind her. She looked past him at the empty apartment, at Paul's deserted room with the pajamas lying crumpled on the bed.

"Our little game is over," she said. "I'm glad."

"I'm glad too," Jim said. "It was interesting, watching him react. His face dropped a mile when his double answered the door. But he's not the same old selfish Paul anymore. He's grown up. I thought he was at first, but he meant it when he said he was quitting. He had me worried for a minute; suppose he had kept to it and actually stayed here? With us?" He winced at the thought.

"It would have complicated things terribly," she said. "It would have destroyed our nice routine completely. Well, suppose we go downstairs and get the poor robot working again. He'll be awfully stiff after two days of being shut off."

They went downstairs, mother and son, and Jim took out the key and activated the Paul-robot. The robot finished

the word he had to say, and stretched his limbs.

"The family is complete again," Jim said.

"It's good to be moving," said the Paul-robot.

Mrs. Robinson turned to her son. "You'd better renew my charge too, Jim," she said. "I'll be running down any day now."

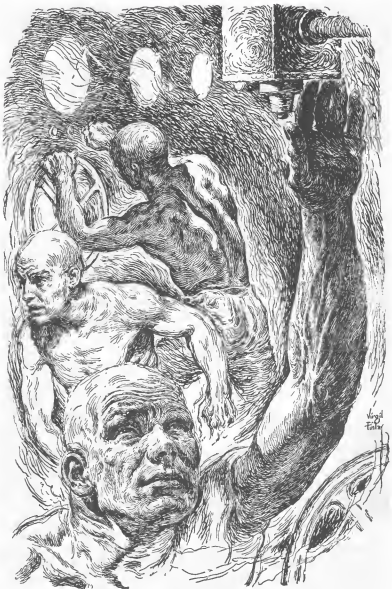
He opened the panel in her back and touched the key to the charging-stud.

"There. Enough energy to keep you going for weeks, mother." He put his arms around his mother and his brother. "Now we can get back into our regular family routine again, until the next time Paul has a furlough. Then we can play the game again."

He looked at the Paul-robot and the mother-robot, and at the cozy four walls that bounded his little world. It was good to have the mother and brother and the home he loved, all the rest of his life. He smiled warmly, and thought of poor Paul fighting for his life on those hot, uncomfortable planets.

He drew them closer to him. "I can't tell you how much you mean to me," he said. "Both of you." His voice was heavy with emotion.

THE END



Stoically, they rode the ship toward their destiny.

O' Captain, My Captain

For twenty years this crew had roamed the System. But now it was over and the time had come for them to return to Earth—where they would be considered freaks. They shrank from the torment and loneliness, yet their greatest concern was: How will they receive our Captain?

CAPTAIN MARTELLO knew every inch of the ship. After twenty years, the Captain thought, pacing up and down the little cabin and holding tight to the dispatch, after twenty years you get to know your own ship pretty well. And your run, too.

Jupiter to Earth. Mean distance, 370,300,000 miles. Martello looked at the dispatch again. For twenty years, Jupiter-Earth, Earth-Jupiter, mean distance 370,300,000 miles, and now it was all over. The Captain drew a deep breath and started out of the cabin (whose paint had long since started to flake and whose few austere furnishings were long since old and well-worn) and wondered what to tell the crew.

"Morning, Cap'n." Martello

glanced up. It was Sullivan—one of the substantial percentage of the crew who had been with the ship since Martello first came aboard (20th May, 2079, something in the Captain's mind whispered) and was still there, twenty years later. Sullivan, like the other members of the crew, was short, stocky, almost five-by-five, bald, space-tanned. He wore only a rag; no more was needed in the heat of the fore section. Sullivan was perfectly adapted for space: sturdy, practically unbreakable, a powerful machine designed for stoking spaceship jets and not much else. On Earth he'd be a pitiful little ape, Martello reflected; here, on The Ship (it once had had a name, but that was years ago; twenty years of ferrying between

Jupiter and Earth had erased whatever name it had once had and left it just The Ship) he fit in perfectly with his environment.

But that was all ended now, Martello thought, crumpling the dispatch a little tighter. *And I have to go back to Earth too.*

"Get the crew together," Martello said to Sullivan. "Get everyone here as quick as you can. Something important's come up."

"Right-o," said Sullivan (all formalities had long since vanished, long ago when captain and crew had fused into the smooth-running unit that carried goods between Jupiter and Earth). He scurried away into the dimly-lit corridor leading to the jet section.

Martello paced up and down. There would be no opening for them on Earth; the spacelines were finished and everyone knew it. There's no market for a second-hand ferry captain, Martello thought grimly — especially one like me.

"What's up, Cap'n?"

"Yeah, what happened?" asked another as, one by one, the crew filed in. Martello studied them. Most, like Sullivan, had been with The Ship since even before Martello's time, had been with The Ship

so long that they were just extensions of the jet tubes by now. Sullivan had been in the Ferry Service over forty years, or so he had once told Martello, and probably all of it had been spent aboard this ship. And that meant a couple of hours loading on Jupiter, and then the ten-day trip to Earth, and then a couple of hours loading on Earth, followed by the ten-day trip back. Theoretically there was supposed to be two days free leave for the crew at the conclusion of each round trip, and at first Martello had insisted on having The Ship's men take the required time off. But they had obviously not wanted to, and, after a while, Martello had seen why: The Ship was their world. Offship they were just a pack of ugly little dwarfs, unwanted and laughed-at on Earth and Jupiter alike. There were not enough ferries in operation for there to be a substantial colony of ferrymen at either end, and the crew had no congenial place to go while offship. So they stopped going, and the two-day free leave became a memory and then not even that. The Ship was The World for her crew, and they had no desire ever to leave. Life for them, consisted of loading and ten-day trip,

loading and ten-day trip, and they neither expected nor asked for change.

But now, Martello thought, they were getting it. The routine was about to halt. The Captain watched as the crew stood patiently waiting. An outsider might have thought they looked all alike, but not Martello; twenty years' experience called to mind the scar above the right eye and associated it with Stevelman, or the long gash on the chest which belonged to Keller.

"Somethin' wrong, Captain Martello?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid," Martello said, in a voice as resonant and commanding as could be achieved. "Something very serious has come up."

Martello wondered how the crew would be able to shift once they were put on their own, now that The Ship was to be taken away. All these ugly little men, bald and space-tanned, some of them naked and sweating from their exertions at the jets; how would they be able to survive in a world where they knew no one and had no function? *And me*, Martello began, and cut the thought off short.

"Schedule, Captain," Sullivan said quietly, and Martello

realized that the crew had been assembled and waiting for almost five minutes Ship-time. The sacred schedule. Martello smiled. Well, that was done with.

"I'll make it short, if not sweet," the Captain said, staring hard at the crewmen. "Effective 25 August, 2099, the Jupiter-Earth ferry is to be replaced by matter-transmitter service. Which means we're cashiered."

Martello saw a wave of anger mixed with fear sweep over the faces of the crew. They began to mutter to each other, in an angry monotone buzz.

"Quiet. That's not the worst of it yet. We all knew this was coming, eventually; the Mars line got theirs a couple of years ago, and it couldn't be long before the same thing happened to us. But at least the Mars ferry-men were given other jobs."

"What's going to happen to us?" Keller shouted.

"Good question," Martello said, looking anxiously at the worried faces. A bolt of pity went through the Captain, pity for the crewmen so capable on board and so helpless when dumped into a world that didn't need them.

"We're to take the ship back to Earth and dump off

the present cargo. That's to be our final load. The Ship is to be retired—my guess is they'll just scrap it—and we're to be pensioned out of the Ferry Service. It only takes four men to operate both ends of a matter-transmitter, and we're not needed. Especially since they intend replacing all the spacelines with transmitters as soon as the receiving poles can be established. So we've had it, men."

"We're not going to take this lying down," Sullivan yelled, in his rumbling bass voice. "Suppose we refuse to go down? We could stay up here forever—as pirates, if necessary." His anger showed through his heavy space-tan; the scar he had acquired in the jet blowup of '84 blazed bright white against his skin.

"No," Martello said quietly. "Aside from the fact that I don't intend to ruin our reputation and that of the whole Ferry Service, it would never work. Maybe the idea of piracy sounds good now, but try to find another ship in space: it's tougher than needles in haystacks, in the first place, and in the second place there aren't going to be any other ships to rob in a few more years. And you can't commit piracy on a matter-transmitter beam."

Sullivan subsided — his long-instilled loyalty for Martello was too powerful for him even to try to argue—but it was obvious to the Captain that the veteran ferryman was angry and dangerous. Martello glanced at the big chronometer overhead.

"Almost time for deceleration. Sullivan, pick a crew and get to work; I want to talk to the rest of you."

Captain Martello faced them squarely.

"That's the position. What do you mean to do about it—within the law?"

"Why don't we ask them to sell us The Ship, Captain?" said a voice from the back. It was Banneman, a younger man who had come aboard about ten years before, and who had not yet fully gone bald and near-black from the cosmic rays that got through the shielding. "Look, we don't want to go to Earth and they don't want us. We're not fitted for life on Earth. Some of us haven't been on the outside of a planet in twenty years. Why don't we buy The Ship from the government and just live on it? We could collect our pensions in food and fuel at regular intervals."

"Yeah," Stevelman added —Martello recalled that Stev-

elman had been one of the first to stop taking leaves, preferring instead to stay on ship. "We could even run our own private ferry service. For people who didn't trust the matter-transmitters, maybe."

Martello leaned back against the wall and, for a moment, permitted the suggestion to seem plausible, before rejecting it.

"I don't think they'd do it. They want us out of space, and they don't want us drifting around on our own. No other ship's ever been allowed to do it; why us? No. Listen to me: you're all grown men, and you're going to have to face this like men. We're going to take The Ship to Earth, unload our cargo, and hand over The Ship. Then we're going out into the world to shift for ourselves. It's not too late for you to forget The Ship and settle down on a planet."

Martello looked at them. They were obviously discontented, but they loved and respected their Captain, and they were listening.

"Back to your posts, now. Let's get this old crate down to Earth in record time!"

The crew dispersed. Captain Martello opened the door of the cabin and walked inside, locking the door. No one

was going to come bothering now.

Fine advice, Martello thought, fingering the long row of logbooks filled during twenty years of ferrying. "You're all grown men." I told them. I talked to them like a mother. Like a mother.

Captain Martello pulled down a logbook at random and flipped through its pages, smiling absently at the close-packed, tiny writing. *I've held their hands for twenty years, and nursed them. But who's holding my hand? What am I going to do when we get back to Earth? You can't tell the captain from the cabin boy without a scorecard.*

The mirror—Martello's one concession to vanity—reflected ironhard muscles, firm, stocky body, gleaming bald head. *All my hair—last had any on Aug. 30, 2088. Right here in the logbook.*

Martello leafed through the pages and found the entry. "Today my remaining strands of hair fell victim to the rays. Now I know I've left Earth for good. They should see me now." Further down the page was one of the countless notations of completion which made up the bulk of Martello's entries. "Landed Jupiter today and unloaded ten crates. They never tell me what I'm

carrying; I wonder if the men ever think of looking? Probably these were just ten crates of respirators, but it might have been anything else. Ten crates of the new green lipsticks I hear all the women on Earth are using this year, maybe. I'm sure the Jovian females wouldn't want to be behind style.

"The crew voted not to take the two days again, so we're loading up tonight and heading right back. At this rate we'll average better than sixteen round trips an Earth year, and that should be a record. Maybe I'll apply for a medal."

Martello put the book back and sat down gently, flicking up the oxygen level in the cabin a bit. This room was home, and would be for another day—no more. On Ship Martello was boss, the wise, respected, infallible leader. Better than boss: God. But on Earth?

It's been a long time. Perhaps suicide (contemplated at 20) would have been better than this eternal shuttling between Jupiter and Earth. But one could get used to the shuttling, even come to love it. Only eventually the wonderful security of the shuttling had to end, and when it does end—as it is ending now—

back to Earth. And there, Martello knew, there was no godhood waiting, just laughter.

The crew would make out all right; they weren't sensitive enough to be disturbed, once the transition was made. *But their position is different entirely*, Martello thought, leaning back with eyes closed. Tomorrow the closed cycle of days would break open and captain and crew would spill out onto Earth. The only thing to do was to rest, and to begin all over to build up strength.

Someone was banging on the door. Hard.

"Wake up, Captain! We've put down!"

Martello leaped up from the hammock. For the first time in twenty years, the Captain had overslept and had failed to supervise personally the landing on Earth. Not that Sullivan couldn't handle the spiral landing orbit just as well, and possibly even better, but Martello had always been there. Until now. The pattern was starting to break down.

Martello selected the most impressive uniform of the three in the wardrobe and put it on. It was only necessary to wear full dress every ten days, while unloading; the

ship's dehumidifier didn't work very well any more, and Martello generally wore only enough to emphasize the existence of a gulf—a tiny one, but still a gulf—between captain and crew. There was no real need for the crew to wear anything in the heat of the jet sections, and they rarely did while working. The habit had begun—somewhat hesitantly—about five years after Martello had taken over.

The Captain when dressed, left the cabin and started out to supervise the unloading, another customary job. But Sullivan had already started the work, and Martello saw there was no reason to interfere. Sullivan had seen to it that all the men were properly dressed before they went outside, and that each crate was being checked out properly. Martello, suddenly feeling the traditional steel exterior of a space captain in port too heavy to maintain, sat down weakly on a bulkhead and watched.

"All the cargo's out, Captain," Sullivan said. He paused. "There's a crowd outside."

"Souvenir hunters, probably," said Martello. "They each want a chunk of The Ship to take home."

Sullivan ignored this. "Any orders?"

Martello felt an intense desire to be alone, all alone with The Ship and no one else.

"Take the men outside and shut the hatch after you."

"You staying here?" Sullivan asked, still obstinately standing near the hatch.

"I have some last-minute things to finish up," Captain Martello said, wishing fervently Sullivan would leave. Every moment the little man continued standing there seemed to make things worse.

"Get out," Martello said, slouching despondently on the bulkhead.

"Anything I can do, captain?"

"Get out!"

Sullivan retreated a couple of steps, and then approached Martello. "Captain . . . I know what it must be like." Sullivan reached out to take Martello's arm. "Come on—let's go."

Infuriated, Martello suddenly reached out and knocked Sullivan sprawling with a backhand blow. Sullivan hit the wall with a dull bang and got up slowly. Martello watched him; it was the first time the Captain had struck a crewman in twenty years, except for an incident the day after Martello had taken over The Ship.

"I know what it's like," Sul-

livan said quietly. He turned and left, and Martello sat there in the dimness, staring at nothing.

Twenty years seemed to float by. All of Martello's great golden accomplishment of becoming a captain seemed to turn to dross. It was all over now, and all empty.

The hatch turned, and Sullivan came back in. From the outside, Captain Martello heard the noise of a huge crowd.

"They're all waiting for you, Captain. You'd better come out."

Slowly, reluctantly, Captain Martello stood up and followed Sullivan, walking slowly through the hatch. It would be the first time she had stood on the solid ground of Earth since her unprecedented attainment of a captaincy, twenty years before. It didn't feel very good to be back.

An immense crowd was waiting for her out there, and a great roar went up as Sullivan and Captain Martello emerged from the ship. A little knot of officers in resplendent uniforms was waiting. Martello recognized the Major General who had commissioned her in 2079. He had been very much bewildered at the prospect of giving a

woman command of a ship, but she had fulfilled the requirements, come through all the tests magnificently, and they had had no choice. The Major General—she had forgotten his name—was now glorious in the uniform of a Marshal, and he came towards her, with microphone in hand.

He was saying something about her, but she didn't hear the words in any coherent pattern. He was talking about her unprecedented accomplishment in being a woman space captain for over twenty years, her inflexible schedule, the way she had broken all records for the Jupiter-Earth ferry, the glory of it all, the book she would undoubtedly write, the fame everlastingly hers, and a lot of other things, while the cheering of the crowd grew and grew. They were roaring her name, over and over again.

There were women in the crowd, and Captain Martello looked at them. They were tall, soft, long-haired, pretty. They were women, *real* women. The Marshal continued to drone on, and Martello saw her crew standing in a worshipful group not far away; looking amazed and bewildered.

There were real women in

that crowd, but they were praising *her* for being a woman—she, who had the muscles and the mind and the bald head of a man. And they were telling her, too, that she was a hero who would never be forgotten.

Suddenly she realized that the fears she had known the day before had been groundless. She would not be pensioned off and forgotten, laughed at, a strange sort of freak. No; she was a hero. Of course she would never be able to take her place among other women, but that was no cause for fear; rather, that was her great claim to glory.

They were pinning some sort of medal on her, but she hardly noticed.

Twenty years ago she had made her choice. She had given up Earth and the life of an earthwoman, and chosen to

act as if she were a man. This, she saw now, was the only fulfillment possible for her. Had she stayed on Earth, she would have been just another ugly duckling. But she made herself into something unique.

Sullivan moved closer to her as the cheering swelled and swelled.

"I never wanted to tell you this on Ship," he said, "but I think you're sort of beautiful, Captain." But from his voice Captain Martello knew that he meant not the sort of beauty a man finds in a woman, but the sort he might find in a goddess.

"Until we're mustered out, Mister Sullivan, you'll address me either as Captain or as Sir," Captain Martello said coldly. But there were tears at the edges of her eyes, and she began to smile a little as the cheering grew still louder.

THE END



"I wonder who the center one's for?"

THE LUNATIC PLANET

It has been said that only a thin line separates genius and insanity, and the idiot must certainly regard the genius as a madman. But perhaps this point is of no great importance when we consider the opposite: What does the genius really think of the idiot?

THE Terran Colony on Chiron was going to be just what Dane Chandler wanted. He sensed it the instant he stepped off the interstellar liner and set foot on Procyon's fourth planet.

With surprise he noted that the colony was not at all the primitive outpost he had feared it would be; it was a bustling active little globe. That pleased him. Chandler had come to Chiron hoping to find a small, tight group of colonists in which he could create

a niche and where he could feel he really belonged.

He paused uncertainly at the edge of town, watching the busy workers, the hurrying farmers and builders. He sensed a sudden, youthful exuberance, as he drew from all this activity, a feeling of growth and expansion of which he could be a part. A sort of joy arose in him, a warmth.

But it was a joy he had felt before. And going to space had not been the solution then.



The screaming native collapsed under the splintering blow.

or leaving space to return to Terra.

When the liner had blasted off—Chiron was just an insignificant stop on a route which covered a dozen stars—Chandler turned to study the three other prospective colonists who had made the voyage from Terra with him. There was a pretty girl, impatient to join her farmer-husband on the new planet; a short, stocky farmer; a nondescript spacefarer, one of the many who drifted the space-lanes from planet to planet. All three had approached Chandler on the ship when they learned that he, too, was going to Chiron, but Chandler had not been friendly with any of them.

Hornaday, the farmer, turned to Chandler and said proudly, "I'm expecting my brother to meet me at the depot. He's been living on Chiron for five years."

"Really?" said Chandler, looking at the golden-green sky.

"Used to write me about how wonderful and new everything is here. Kept telling me, so I decided to come. We've both been saving for two years for my passage—we did not even write to each other, to save on postage."

"Yes," said Chandler. He had put a year of his space pension into his passage-fee. He took a deep breath. The air smelled good. Chandler realized with a shock that this was probably the first time in his life that really fresh air had ever entered his lungs. First there had been the soup that passed for air on Terra, and then, through the long years in space, the purified but subtly stale air of spaceships. And then, when loneliness had finally driven him from space, the air of Terra again. But here the air was fresh and good.

A short, heavily-tanned, wind-creased man approached the little group of new arrivals. Chandler scanned the newcomer's face and saw that beneath the scars of the elements he bore the same good-natured simple face that belonged to the farmer on his right. The newcomer must be Hornaday's brother, Chandler thought. He was right.

The two men embraced unashamedly. Hornaday picked up his little bag of belongings and, talking excitedly, followed his brother off into the town.

Chandler watched them disappear into the heart of the colony, staring at the two

broad backs side by side. In a few weeks Hornaday would blend with the other colonists. His Terran background would melt and trickle away, and he would be working side by side as a member of the colony. Chandler envied him.

A white-haired colonist, tall and straight and smiling, appeared abruptly at Chandler's elbow. "I'm Kennedy," he said. "You're Dane Chandler?"

Chandler glanced at the other, surprised. "Yes," he said. "Are you the man who's supposed to meet me?"

"That's right. Glad to see you, Chandler. We can use men like you here on Chiron. Come on—I'll show you where you're going to stay."

Kennedy began to walk off in the direction the Hornadays had taken, and Chandler followed him.

"I'm relocation director, among my other jobs," Kennedy explained. "It's my duty to see that all the new arrivals get satisfactorily settled and orientated. Since you don't know anyone on Chiron yet, I've taken the liberty of assigning you a roommate. He's Jeff Burkhart, one of our earliest colonists—came here on the second ship, back in '16—and I think he'll be able to help you get acquainted with the set-up here."

They turned down a long, straight street with small houses on either side of a well-paved road. The street was studded with twisted, red-leaved miniature trees.

"You're a former spaceman, aren't you?"

"That's what my application said. I got tired of the life after a while and quit. I thought space would be the life for me—I don't mind being by myself sometimes—but I couldn't take the emptiness, the loneliness—"

"I know," Kennedy said. "I used to do the Jupiter run."

"You know, then. Two years ago I pensioned out and went back to Terra to settle down."

"You didn't stay on Terra very long," Kennedy observed.

"They didn't want me, and I didn't want them. It worked out very nicely. No one was interested in a spaceman who had spent half his life out of the main stream of things. And it was like living in a beehive, staying on Earth. Twenty million people in this city, thirty million in that one, and I think I knew four people altogether by name. It was worse living in a city of strangers than in space. So I came here. New, small colony. I want to find a place where I belong."

"I see," Kennedy said.

Dane Chandler hoped he had.

"Burkhart's a good man for you," Kennedy went on. "He's a solid individual. One of our best men."

"I'd like to get to meet him," Chandler said. "Hey—what's that?"

A preposterously tall, chalk-white humanoid alien with long clawlike hands and an appearance of great fragility was coming up the street toward him, laughing and crying all at once. When he saw Chandler he clapped his hands and gave a wild roar of laughter, then dashed onward down the street.

"That's one of the natives—the Chirenes."

"Is it drunk, or just plain silly?"

"That native is as sober as you are," Kennedy said, frowning. "He's insane, that's all. They're all like that. It's a planet of total lunatics."

Chandler racked his memory for some fact he might have learned about the natives of Chiron. But there were so many worlds, so many sorts of aliens—he gave up.

"Lunatics? How come?"

"No one knows. They were living a sort of nomadic existence when we got here, and some of them decided to hang around the colony. The rest

vanished somewhere as soon as they spotted us. We've never been able to find them."

Finally they stopped walking, and Kennedy indicated a trim three-room house. "I've assigned you this one. I think you'll like it, and Burkhart ought to be able to handle any questions you may have. Or you can come see me if there's trouble. Everyone knows where I live—just ask anyone."

They entered the house. Burkhart was stretched out on a comfortable-looking foamite sofa, reading. He snapped off the projector and rose to greet Chandler.

"I'm Jeff Burkhart," he said warmly. "You're Dane Chandler, right?"

Chandler nodded. Burkhart was almost as tall as he was—nearly two meters—and had obviously been a powerful man in his youth. Some of his muscle had turned to fat, but he still seemed to be in good shape. He looked to be about sixty, Chandler decided, noting that Burkhart's hair was prematurely gray.

"Glad to meet you, Chandler. Welcome to Chiron, and all such sentiments. Kennedy's probably welcomed the devil out of you by this time. He's good at it."

"I'll let you two get ac-

quainted," Kennedy said, and left, smiling.

With formalities over, the two men confronted each other almost icily for a moment. Chandler determined not to reveal anything until Burkhart did. At last the older man flung himself loosely on the couch.

"You know anyone in the colony, Dane? Got any friends here, I mean?"

"Not a one," Chandler said. "I can't recall having very many friends anywhere, to speak of."

Burkhart smiled faintly, and Chandler realized that he appeared to be inviting pity.

"I don't mean it that way," he snapped. "It's just that I never found time to make friends. I was always alone in space except when I was on Terra, and you know what Terra's like."

"Seven billion people on a planet fit for three. Sure, I know. But we've only got a few thousand here."

"What kind of work do you do?" Burkhart asked. "I'm one of the hiring organizers here."

"I'll start off building, I think. I want to know I've had a hand in building Chiron." He leaned back, stretched out, and did his best to summon an enthusiastic smile.

Burkhart found him a job in a construction project, and Chandler tried conscientiously to become friendly with the men he worked with, but it was no good. The same thing which had driven Dane Chandler into space at the beginning—the feeling that there was a wall between him and the rest of the world—kept him from really getting to know anyone on this new planet. Even Burkhart remarked openly about it.

"I can't figure you out," he said one night at the Entertainment Casino. "I've lived with you three weeks and you are still almost a stranger."

Chandler sipped his drink and said nothing.

"For instance," Burkhart went on, "you went to space. You never really told me why you quit, or where you served. You were lonely, you said, but that's pretty vague. How lonely? Didn't you stop at ports long enough for women to—?"

"Lay off," Chandler said.

Burkhart ordered another drink. "No. I think it's important. Why'd you leave space, really?"

"Space fatigue," Chandler said. "Too many solo trips."

"I see," Burkhart said. "You may think I'm prying—"

"I do."

"I'm just trying to help you."

"Thanks," Chandler said. He gulped the drink and leaned back in his chair. The Casino was filled with laughing colonists, and weaving through the gay crowd like white threads through black were a few of the natives, bizarrely dressed and wild-looking.

"Why don't you ever visit some of the men you work with, Dane?" Burkhart prodded. "I'll bet you don't even know all their names. Do you?"

Suddenly Chandler hated Burkhart.

"There. I'm right. They're just faces to you, instead of people. I think that's your trouble: you've been away from people so much you don't know what they are. If you weren't so wrapped up in yourself all the time, you'd—" Burkhart broke off suddenly. "Watch out, you clumsy idiot!"

A native had come by, and, flailing his arms aimlessly in the air, had knocked Burkhart's drink all over his lap. Infuriated, Burkhart rose and in one swift motion knocked the tall, elongated alien to the floor. Instantly the sound of laughter died away in the Ca-

sino and a hundred pairs of eyes turned to watch.

"You idiots have been in my hair long enough," Burkhart shouted vehemently. "Why don't you learn to stay away from us?" He stared down at the Chirene who lay on the floor, his pale tongue licking in and out of his mouth.

Chandler sensed that Burkhart's rage was mounting within him, and he stood up next to the older man in an attempt at heading off the explosion.

"Sit down, Jeff. The poor animal didn't mean to knock your drink over, after all."

"Shut up," Burkhart said. "This isn't the first time they have done that." He scooped up the alien, holding him by the bunched-up front of his robe. The Chirene's head towered almost a foot over Burkhart's. "You've been going out of your way to bother me, haven't you?" Burkhart demanded.

"Let go of him, Jeff," Chandler said.

"I'll let go of him, all right!" He flung the alien across the room; he crashed into a table and collapsed in a heap, while glass cascaded down, broke, and tinkled.

Chandler drew back his arm and hit Burkhart in the face,

hard. Burkhart sank softly into his seat. A trickle of blood began to wind from the corner of his mouth.

Thank you, someone said.

"You're welcome," Chandler replied automatically.

Then he realized that no voice had broken the stillness that pervaded the Casino.

Thank you. For once someone has defended us from him.

Chandler slowly turned, understanding who had spoken, and looked inquiringly at the grotesque alien. The alien returned his glance, and calmly nodded.

"It *was* telepathy, wasn't it?" Chandler asked after he had finally gotten the cadaver-like alien back to his room and dropped him on the couch. Burkhart had watched coldly as Chandler picked up the Chirene and dragged him out, but had made no move.

The alien's name was Oran, and he was half drunk and half insane. He drooled and laughed and cried and cursed, but gradually began to calm down.

Yes, it was telepathy, said a quiet voice in Chandler's mind.

"I was right," Chandler said.

The alien laughed. Chandler studied him carefully—an ab-

surd, clownlike figure, almost seven feet tall, stretched out at full length, slowly twitching first one limb and then another.

"Your people regard mine as insane," the alien said aloud, slowly. "But *you* are the insane ones. Your people have destroyed ours," he said tonelessly.

"What's that?"

"There are always such undercurrents of hate flowing from your minds. Our only fault was that we could see into them."

The alien closed his eyes and curled up into a fetal ball. Chandler waited patiently, and at last he uncurled.

"I haven't been this coherent in years," the Chirene remarked. "My people—why do you radiate all this curiosity?—my people lived here before yours came to colonize. We never needed to speak out loud—always in the mind, as I did to thank you. Then you came and destroyed us. We looked into your minds—we couldn't help it—and our minds were blasted by the horror and hatred we saw in yours. We went insane."

Chandler sat down heavily. The Chirene struggled to his feet and tried feebly to leave, but Chandler concentrated on controlling the alien mentally,

and succeeded. He subsided.

"You're the first who knows we have the *sorn* sense. We lived in the closest mental rapport, sharing every thought and every emotion. And the first Terrans landed and came forward to greet us, and we extended our minds to them as is our custom, and we looked in, and the pit of filth that lay at the bottom of their minds swept us down. But I'm talking too much. Let me go, please."

The alien pulled himself to a sitting position again.

Wait, Oran, Chandler ordered.

"You're too strong for me," the alien said. "I feel the pressure of your mind on mine, and I'm not strong enough to resist. You Terrans are all alike."

"Is this true—about what happened to your people?"

"I'm not a Terran, Chandler. I can tell only truth."

"Were they all—all of them destroyed?"

Oran hesitated. "Were they?" Chandler repeated.

"No," Oran said. "Some fled to the desert and hid there. No Terran will ever find out where."

Suddenly the alien paled almost to a bright white. Chandler realized that the Chirene had picked up his thought

even before he had let it rise from his subconscious.

No. I won't take you there. I can't!

Oran turned away and began to sob convulsively. Chandler wandered up and down the room, while the picture slowly began to form in his mind—the picture he knew the alien must have constructed long before it had shaken into place in the cruder mind of the Terran.

Point one: telepathy existed.

Point two: the aliens were unable to bear the proximity of presumably filth-ridden Terran minds.

Point three: a telepathic Dane Chandler would be one who at last would be no longer isolated from his fellow men.

Point four: if—

I wish you had let me lie on the Casino floor. Yes, your guess is right. Telepathy can be induced in humans.

Chandler paused and stood still as the alien's mind crackled out the thought. The final piece of the jigsaw puzzle clicked neatly into place and he turned to face the sobbing, miserable Chirene.

You'll take me to the hidden Chirenes, Oran, Chandler's mind said. It was Chandler's most powerful need, the need

to associate and blend with other men, the one factor that had always been missing from his personal equation. Now the solution was in his grasp. Relentlessly he let his mind pound against the helpless, already-weakened mind of the alien. *You'll take me there, Oran.*

It was a command rather than a question.

After a long silence Oran answered, out loud. "You Terrans never satisfy yourselves. You've destroyed a wonderful civilization and now you're going for the remnant of it. All right. I can't defend against your mind. I'll lead you to my people. You've made me sell out my race. All right, Chandler; get your things together and let's go—*Terran!*"

The last word was an explosive spitting thought that ripped into Chandler's brain. He looked grimly at Oran, and tried to let his mind beg forgiveness.

The Chironian desert was wide and flat, with clumps of thick vegetation holding down the sand dunes. Oran set a merciless pace through the yellow sands, and Chandler followed, not speaking and trying not to think. The tall figure of the alien bobbed constantly in front of him. Chan-

dler winced at the realization that he was grinding the last speck of self-respect out of the Chirene, but he saw himself approaching the end of a weary quest.

For as far as he could see, there was desert. It looked the same all around, except for the dark patch far behind him which marked the end of the desert and the beginning of the verdant land where the Terran colony was situated.

As dusk began to settle and the strange purple Chironian twilight covered the land, Chandler realized that the alien could very easily be leading him in circles, waiting for his food to run out.

"Are we heading in the right direction, Oran?" he asked, breaking a silence that had endured for almost twelve hours.

The stinging response came: *Am I a Terran?*

Stung by the rebuke, Chandler looked away and began silently to make camp for the evening. They settled and awaited the night.

Chandler lay awake for hours, dreaming of the hidden city that was somewhere ahead, and planning. Oran, next to him, seemed to be in deep slumber.

Finally, Chandler dozed off. After what seemed like hardly

any elapsed time, he awoke brusquely to the sound of wild laughter.

He needed a moment to adjust to wakefulness. Then he peered into the darkness and saw the figure of Oran, dashing off through the Chironian night.

Oran, he telepathed desperately. *Come back!*

But the alien kept running. Chandler watched him go, helplessly. There was no use trying to pursue the long-legged alien.

I cannot face my people. The sudden thought reached Chandler like a cry drifting on the winds. Oran continued running until he faded from sight as if hidden behind a curtain of black. Chandler stood staring into the night for a while, and then sat down on the shifting sand and awaited the coming of dawn.

When Procyon rose to bring morning, Chandler surveyed the situation. Somewhere ahead of him was the hidden city of the Chirenes. Behind him was the Terran colony. He would have to take his chances with the desert, he decided, and keep going.

He headed through the trackless sands, mind fixed firmly on the unknown destination ahead. The sun rose

higher and higher in the sky, and he cursed Oran more and more as it grew hotter. Frequently he turned to make sure the Terran colony still lay behind him. It would never do to wander for days only to blunder foolishly back to the colony without having found anything.

A great green bird leaped from the clinging shubbery as he tramped through it, and, uttering angry squawks, headed for the sun. Chandler continued through the long afternoon, stopping occasionally to empty the gritty sand from his boots.

For the hundredth time he checked the colony, now just a speck on the horizon. Then he moved forward. The sun was oppressively hot now, and sweat was trickling down his back. There was nothing in sight but rolling dunes and low shrubs. The silence roared in his ears.

Chandler began to feel that Oran had tricked him after all and left him to die in the desert. But there could be no turning back now. He moved ahead.

Go no further. Halt and return.

The thought struck him in the forehead and held him for a moment, and the suddenness of it brought a flash of fear

racing down the back of his legs.

"Who said that?" he asked aloud.

Then he passed a hand across his eyes to clear away the sweat, and silently answer his own question.

Don't go any further, Dane Chandler. We cannot bear your presence.

"Who are you?" said Chandler.

You needn't pretend, Chandler. You know who we are. We have watched you closely since you first encountered Oran.

"You know what I want, don't you?"

The sorn sense is not for Terrans, Chandler. Go back and let us mourn alone.

"I'll decide that," Chandler said. He took a tentative step forward. There was no resistance. The ghost of a suspicion wandered through his mind.

Yes, came the confirmation. We cannot prevent you from approaching. We ask you—as between civilized beings—to go back and not expose us to your mind.

Chandler kept moving, placing one foot carefully in front of the other. He could feel the mental voice of the aliens growing desperate.

"You know what I want," he repeated.

Do you really want telepathy, Chandler? Do you really want to be able to look at the minds of your brothers? We have already seen them. We know what lies beneath their surfaces.

Chandler stared at the bright glinting of the sun on the hot sands. "Yes. I want it. And I'll leave you in peace if you'll give it to me."

He took another step forward.

We have no choice, said the silent voice, and there was a note of pain in it. We cannot bear the nearness of your mind any longer. We will show you how to realize your latent extra-sensory powers, and then leave us.

Chandler quivered. "I'm ready," he said.

Open your mind to us.

Chandler relaxed, closing his eyes, and let their minds flow through his, feeling them rising and swelling in a celestial symphony in perfect harmony. Their minds bathed his, explored his, beat upon his. He sank to his knees in the sand.

Suddenly perception burst upon him as if an explosion had blasted away scales from his eyes. Their minds were open to his.

It was one great mind composed of individual members,

blending and merging to form a unity. A sense of being in the presence of a divinity washed over him and left him breathless.

Then it was over. As suddenly as it had begun, it ended. Their minds closed to him. The weight of that rejection bowed him lower in the sand.

Go. We have kept our word. Go back and look at your brothers.

"Can't I stay here with you?" Chandler finally asked.

It would destroy us. You have what you want. Go.

He nodded to the invisible aliens somewhere before him in the desert. The thought of the colony and all its people came to him.

"Right. I'll go."

His head throbbed and pounded as he about-faced. The speck that was the Terran colony was hidden by the afternoon shadows, but he felt the presence of Terran minds in the distance, and he set out across the desert to reach them, to join them, to offer them the gift he bore.

As he approached the colony a vague uneasiness began to wander through his mind, growing slowly until it became a definite feeling of fear. The colony loomed up before him and he strode toward it, won-

dering who he would encounter first.

It was Kennedy. The white-haired relocation director smiled and waved when he saw him. Chandler held his powers in check as best he could, waiting for the moment to let them free.

"I've been looking for you, Dane," Kennedy said. "Jeff Burkhart told me you had some sort of fight with him, and I want to smooth things over if I can. We don't want any of that on this world—we want to get away from fighting here, Dane."

Chandler held his mind frozen. "I've been away," he said, ignoring Kennedy's words. "Something's happened to me."

He let down the bars and his mind opened up, enfolding Kennedy and all the other minds within reach of his. There was a moment of awareness, and then Chandler fell to the ground, writhing in agony.

"What's wrong?" Kennedy bent hurriedly to examine him. Chandler buried his face in the ground and wrapped his arms around his head to shut out the thoughts that beat against his brain. Kennedy lifted Chandler as if he were a baby.

Chandler peered into the

bottom of Kennedy's mind, allowed his own mind to see through the windows of the other's eyes and into his brain. He yelled, broke loose, and dashed off heading for the desert.

When he was far enough from the colony he threw himself down on a sand dune and tried to collect himself.

Looking into Kennedy's mind had been like crawling through a pit of worms. On the surface Kennedy was a respected member of the community, a leader of men, a righteous and honest man. But under the coating of virtue lay a nest of hatreds, fears, pain-memories, with twisted dreams and evil schemes, coiling and uncoiling like prisoned vipers trying to break loose.

And Kennedy was considered a good man.

Chandler could see now why Oran considered his life over, why the remaining sane Chirenes had retreated to the desert. Whatever it was (that lurked below the surface of the Terran mind, it was not something which could be looked upon safely.

Chandler saw his fate clearly: he would have to resign from humanity.

You asked for it, a voice said. The sorn sense was your greatest desire. Was it pleas-

ant, the mind of your brother?

"Let me come to you," Chandler pleaded. "You did this to me."

You were responsible for everything. Now face it.

Chandler scooped up a handful of sand and whirled it through the air. "But I'm worse off than ever. Now I'm neither man nor Chirene. Let me come to you."

We would if we were able, Chandler, the Chirenes replied. We are not vindictive. But our safety must come before yours. Your mind is deadly to us.

Chandler began suddenly to run across the sand toward the hidden city.

Stop.

"No!"

Now that you have the sorn sense, we have a power over you that we did not have before. We ask you not to come closer to us. You carry a plague in your mind.

"You can't stop me," Chandler shouted defiantly. "You can't just shut me out."

We can.

They unleashed a bolt of thought that slapped Chandler to his knees. He rocked dizzily, tried to withstand it, failed and fell.

Your mind is now open to ours. We can wipe it clean and

eliminate the danger of your existence.

"No," Chandler said. Defeated, he sat up dazedly, rubbed his forehead, and slowly crawled away across the sand. The massed Chirene mind gradually withdrew its pressure until he was completely alone.

He stood by himself in the desert for a while, thinking. The Chirenes had cut him off, walled him up, cast him loose. They neither could nor would have anything to do with him.

And as for the Terrans?

He let his mind rove gingerly over the desert toward the colony, and, feeling only a mild revulsion but none of the horror produced by close contact, examined the thoughts of the Terrans much as he might study a drugged scorpion. No, there could be no return.

He wandered off in the desert, exploring the colony with his mind and, despite all, exulting a little in his power to project himself across miles into the minds of others. The emptiness of the desert sang to him.

He sensed an unfamiliar mental voice. Another. Two more. He probed a little deeper and found that they were new colonists landing. Chandler examined them detachedly. Farmers, young wives, all

with the festering grimness in the heart of their minds.

Chandler had the greatest power known to the human mind. But it cut him off from humanity forever. Angrily, he kicked up some sand.

Perhaps, he thought, somewhere on Chirene there was a mind he could reach and touch and know without recoiling.

There must be one, he thought.

No. Not even one, came the reply.

I thought you weren't listening to me any more, Chandler said. *I thought you had let me go.*

Your thought broke through our barrier.

There is one, Chandler said. *There must be someone whose mind I can know.*

Then look for him, the Chirenes said, and withdrew.

"I'll live in the desert," Chandler said out loud. He thought of Terra with its teeming billions, and of the emptiness of space. "One by one I'll sound out their minds, looking, looking at the inner thoughts, the thoughts beneath the thoughts. There must be one. If not now, then later. I'll find him."

He extended a probing beam of thought, entered the mind of Jeff Burkhart, withdrew, found the mind of the farmer

Hornaday, and withdrew again. They were not the ones.

Chandler squinted and saw a figure approaching him across the desert, waving to him as he trotted over the sand. It was Kennedy, Chandler saw. He turned, ignoring him, and started off deeper into the desert to begin his lonely vigil. He examined and

discarded, examined and withdrew, looking, looking, as he headed for the heart of the desert.

Someday, somewhere, there would be an answer. He knew that, as he knew he was alive.

In the meantime, Chandler was alone—alone, with his terrible power.

More alone than he had ever been before.

THE END



"It's nice we can make a little spending money while here on Earth!"

CALL ME ZOMBIE!

Phil Marsh came home to find a new set of laws. No man his own master; no freedom; no individuality. A world of puppets. So Phil had a mission—to find the puppeteer.

THE troop-train let Phil Marsh off at Grand Central, and he stood in the midst of a jostling mob of his ex-buddies, wondering whether to call Marilyn or not. She wasn't expecting him until Friday; it was only Wednesday, now.

Someone nudged him. Harry Davenport. "Let's go get a beer," Davenport said. "Our first as civilians again."

"No. My wife—"

"Your wife can wait. She isn't figuring on having you come home till Friday, anyway. Give the gal a decent amount of time to say goodbye to her boy friends, huh? What's a few more minutes?"

Marsh scowled. "I don't like jokes like that—"

"Jakes? Who knows?" Davenport said. "Strange are

the ways of servicemen's wives."

Marsh heaved his duffel-bag higher on his shoulder and glared coldly at Davenport. He and Davenport had been drafted around the same time and had spent two years in the same outfit; still, Marsh felt he hardly knew the tall, hard-faced man at his side. And suddenly he didn't want to know him any more. There was something about Davenport—

"So? You coming for a beer with me?"

"The hell with a beer. I'm going home. I haven't seen my wife in two years, and I can't get home soon enough."

Davenport's cold eyes twinkled. "I'm warning you, you better call first. You never can tell what you'll find if you



What evil genius was running the show?

come popping in on her like that!"

There wasn't room in the crowd for Marsh to hit him. Angry, he shouldered his way through the mob, went past the cotton-candy booths and the newsstands, found fifteen cents in his pocket and bought a token. At least *that* hadn't changed; they were talking about raising the fare to twenty cents, but they hadn't.

The new fluorescents made the IRT track incredibly bright and airy, though they showed up all the dirt. Marsh stood all the way into Brooklyn, got off at his old station, walked the familiar five-block walk to his house. It all looked pretty much the same, though he didn't recognize any of the kids playing out in front.

He paused for a moment outside the house, fumbling through his civilian belongings for his house-key, still angered at what Davenport had said.

He knew Marylin better than that. Grinning in anticipation of her surprise, he ran up the stairs, jiggled the key into the lock, and opened the door.

"Hey! Guess who's home, Marylin! I—" His voice died away.

She was standing in the middle of the floor, stock-still, eyes open, mouth gaping, looking very much like a department-store-dummy version of herself. Marsh had never seen anyone so dead-looking and yet so alive.

It was as if she had been turned off when he went away—and hadn't been turned back on yet.

No more than a fraction of a second passed before she was awake and smiling warmly, but that fraction of a second was enough. Life flowed back into her; the change was apparent. But Marsh felt a cold chill as she skipped across the floor to wrap herself jubilantly around him.

"Phil! Phil! You said Friday, and it's only Wednesday! Darling, I was going to have the place all fixed up to surprise you, with ribbons and streamers and things—but I guess this is a much better surprise—*isn't it?*"

"Of course," he said, without any warmth at all. His mind kept going back to the thing he'd seen when he opened the door—the puppet-Marylin who'd awakened into the real one when she realized he was watching her.

He couldn't help thinking of Davenport's warning—*you never can tell what you'll find*

if you come popping in on her like that. Maybe, Marsh thought, Davenport hadn't been talking about possible infidelity. Maybe it was something uglier and deeper and more horrible than that.

Marylin's hand brushed his cheek lightly. "I can't believe you're really back. My mind is sort of geared to Friday—I was counting the days and the hours and tomorrow I was going to start counting the minutes."

"They processed us through quicker. That was all there was to it. The Friday discharges gained two days—and we even get paid for them!" Marsh tried to smile, but the thought of—that—dampened his lightheartedness.

"You seem strange," Marylin said. "Cold . . . almost frightened. Is there something wrong? Darling, two years . . . I hope they didn't do anything to you!"

He jerked out of his strange mood with an effort. "No—it's just being home, that's all. And thinking." He looked around. "The place is fixed up nice. You've been taking care of it for me."

And it looks just the way it did when I went away. Complete to the cigarette-ashes in the ashtray, and the dishes in the sink.

Like a stage-set, he thought weirdly. Stage-sets don't change unless someone changes them.

"There's beer in the ice-box," Marylin said. "Your favorite brand. I was stocking up for Friday."

"Let's go have some, then. My throat feels pretty dry."

He followed her into the kitchen. He was remembering something else, now—a long discussion he had had with Harry Davenport, a year or so back. He had forgotten about it. But now, as if triggered, it rose to the front of his mind.

It wasn't long after Basic, and they had been stationed in Germany on a do-nothing post where the chief activity was drinking the dark German beer (very tasty) and ogling the passing German frauleins (very hefty).

Marsh and Davenport had had an afternoon to kill in Hamburg; they were serving as chauffeurs for some of the brass, and while the high-level conference went on across the street the chauffeurs were free to cool their heels until wanted.

They were in one of those German combination hotel-bars and pickup-joints, drinking authentic Bock beer and

saying very little. Marsh hadn't been in the Army long enough to be used to the idea of being separated from his wife, and he was lonely and not very talkative. Being with Davenport didn't help; the big man always seemed half a million miles away and frosty as the top of Everest. Marsh knew hardly anything about him, despite constant contact with him.

But then a German girl came waddling along, the kind who looked to have grown fat and healthy on a diet of sauerbraten and beer. She was young—twenty-five or thereabouts—and might have been pretty with fifty less pounds aboard. Marsh stared broodingly at her. Her fat smiling face bore no sign of intelligence.

And after her came another, and another. Pleasant plump girls who seemed to be cut from a cookie-tin.

"Look at them," he said. "Waddling along ten or twenty an hour, and all of them alike. Like so many puppets without strings, moving along a fixed path and not knowing what the hell for. Damn, I'm getting philosophical in my old age, huh?" He swilled down more of the dark, rich beer.

But Davenport looked at

him, cold amusement in his face. "Maybe they are."

"Huh? Are what?"

"Puppets. Like you said."

Marsh shook his head in confusion. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's an old theory of mine. That most of the world's people are *golems*—dummies, with no real life of their own. That just a few of us are really alive, and the rest of us just toys, playthings to give an appearance of reality to the world surrounding the real few."

A gust of cold wind blew suddenly into the streetside cafe. Marsh shivered a little. "Dummies? Puppets?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Of course," Marsh said, "*We're* among the real people, you and me. Or else we would never be talking about it like this."

Davenport chuckled. "I don't know about you. But *I'm* real."

That conversation, nothing but a beery bit of time-passing speculation then, now took on a sharp-focussed immediacy.

Marylin was bustling around the kitchen, taking two cans of beer from the refrigerator, opening them (a little spray of beer frothed up

at her, the way it always did), pouring them carefully, so as not to put heads on them, into the tall pilsener glasses Marsh had bought one day about three years before.

She looked real.

The freshness of her smile, the whiteness of her teeth, the trim little figure and the yellow-brown hair—

Real?

Or the work of an ingenious puppet-master?

Sweat beaded Marsh's face. He said, "Marylin—when I came through the door a little while ago—I thought there was something funny about the way you looked."

"Funny? Why, what could you mean?" She efficiently cleared away the empty beer cans and set Marsh's drink on the table before him.

He groped for words. "I mean—you looked sort of *vacant*. Like an empty body someone had hung up to dry. I almost got the feeling you had been standing like that for two years, ever since I was drafted. That you've just been carefully designed as a toy for me. That you aren't real at all, Marylin. Not *really* real."

She looked searchingly at him. "Phil, let me touch your forehead. You must have caught something when you

were overseas. Malaria, or something that affects the brain."

He shook her hand away.

Maybe I am crazy, he thought. *Brain-fever. This is no way to be talking to my wife ten minutes after coming home from Germany.*

But Davenport's mocking words bit into him, drifting back clear and sharp.

He sipped his beer.

"Phil—"

"Eh?"

"Those things you said a minute ago. You were kidding, weren't you? It's just some crazy thing, some joke you heard overseas. About being *real*."

"Oh—yeah, sure. Sure, kid. Don't listen to me too seriously. The sight of you makes me a little slaphappy, that's all."

But he was thinking: *If there's just a few of us real ones and Marylin's only a puppet, I ought to be able to turn her on and off whenever I felt like it. What good's a toy you can't turn on and off?*

He thought about it a while. Turned it over six different ways in his mind, while Marylin carried away the empty beer glasses, washed them, moved around the kitchen tidying things up. She looked real, lovely, desirable.

He decided to test it.

"Marylin?"

"Yes, Phil?"

"Stop. Just stop. Freeze. I'm turning you off like the puppet you are. Pretend I never came back from the Army. Pretend you're still frozen here, waiting for me."

He expected her to giggle scornfully, or to get angry, or to react in any one of the ways Marylin would react to such a ridiculous request. But she didn't do any of those things, though.

She froze.

One minute she was Marylin, smiling, breathing, lovingly grinning at him. A minute later she was the slackjawed empty thing he had seen when he came in, rigid, vacant-eyed, drained of all life and personality and motion.

He walked up to the thing that had been his wife and gently touched her forehead. It was cold. The warmth that had been Marylin was just part of the illusion.

Illusion. He felt chilled.

"Come out of it," he said hoarsely. "Wake up, Marylin. Unfreeze."

It was as if a light-switch had been turned; she awoke, life flowing back into her.

"What was that you said,

Phil? I'm afraid I didn't quite hear you—"

"Freeze."

She froze again. On, off. Flick, flick. Just a puppet.

Marsh walked to the window and looked outside. It was just an ordinary Brooklyn afternoon, kids coming home from school, a punch-ball game going on in the street, a young mother rocking her baby to sleep across the way where it was sunny, a policeman directing traffic at the big intersection up ahead.

He looked back at the empty Marylin. He wondered how much of the world was illusion, how much real. He wondered how he had stumbled into this nightmare.

I would have been better off if I never met that devil Davenport, he thought bitterly. He started me thinking about this. If I hadn't started it I'd still be happy, still have Marylin. And the whole damned world.

Almost without knowing what he was doing he slipped on a jacket that had hung in his closet two years, walked past the frozen Marylin-thing, past his abandoned duffel-bag, and out the door. He didn't bother locking it.

He started down the stairs. A creaking sound came from below, and a fat figure round-

ed the balustrade on the second floor. Mrs. Giovanetti, the landlady.

Her round little eyes beamed as she caught sight of him. "Why, Mr. Marsh! You weren't supposed to be back till Friday, and I was going to bake a cake for—"

"Freeze," he said. "Turn yourself off."

Mrs. Giovanetti seemed to slump into herself and stood lumplike on the stairs like a potato sack. Shuddering, Marsh walked around her and continued on down. He wished he *had* come back on Friday. If he hadn't caught Marylin by surprise that way, this wouldn't be happening.

He came out into the bright clean sunlight. A boy and a dog came by: the boy about eight, dirty-faced, the dog a wire-haired terrier that didn't like being held on its leash.

"Hey, kid."

"Yeah, mister?"

"I'm tired of you. Stop being alive."

The boy became a statue of a boy. And the terrier stopped straining at the leash and froze, just like that, leaning forward with its tongue half out.

Marsh kept going.

The delivery boy bringing up the groceries—a pimple-

facd teenager who was probably worrying about the draft himself. Marsh froze him, extracted the pseudo-life with a word.

The policeman waving the cars on became a blue-clad statue. The cars obediently stopped; Marsh stepped off the sidewalk and came over to the driver of the first car.

He was a balding man in his fifties. He leaned out the open window and Marsh froze him. A Buick behind them started to honk. Marsh made the honking stop.

A cold sort of numbness grew in him as he moved on down the block, heading toward the subway. His feet were taking him on; he had no idea of where he was going, or why. But it took just a word to drain life from the puppets he met.

At the corner newsstand, an old woman was sitting behind a stack of newspapers. Marsh put down a dime, picked up a paper, and froze her. He took back his dime. The newspaper had all the usual news, the crises and the Presidential statements, the UN debates and the baseball scores. The Dodgers were in third place, battling for second. The President was returning from his vacation, smiling, tanned, healthy-looking.

"Is it all a game?" Marsh asked out loud. "Played out for my benefit only? *Am I the only real one?*"

It looked that way.

"What's that, Mister?" a passing truckdriver asked. "You got troubles?"

Marsh froze him too.

He moved on . . . on through this world of stringless puppets that danced out their dramas for him. He wondered if it went on this way all over the world, or just where he was. He had been in Germany, seen the frauleins and gulped the bock beer. Was Germany frozen in pseudo-death now that he was in America? For that matter, did people freeze every time he looked the other way?

There wasn't any way of finding that out, he thought.

I'm the only one that's real. In the whole damned world.

It was a shocking, numbing realization.

He reached the subway; busy shoppers jostled past him as if they didn't know he could stop them in their tracks with a word, or perhaps a thought or a sour look. Marsh scooped change out of his pockets and scowled when he saw he had no tokens. The line at the change-booth was ten or twelve people long.

But there was an easy solution. He moved up the line, freezing them as he went, and reached the front. The change-booth keeper was staring pop-eyed at him.

"You can freeze too," Marsh said. He reached into the booth and took a token for himself. What did stealing fifteen cents matter now? What did *anything* matter?

It was like moving through a world of soap-bubbles that popped at his command.

The uptown express came along, crowded. Marsh stepped inside and rode silently to Manhattan, listening to the conversations going on all around him, to the flapping of mouths with no meaning intended. Bitterly he glanced from one face to another. Behind the flickering eyes, behind the faces and the smiles—*nothing*, he thought. *Just emptiness.*

The train arrived at Grand Central. Marsh stepped out, stuck his head back into the train, and said, "I'm tired of all of you. *Stop!*"

Conversation died away. Marsh left the train, conscious of the trail of demolition he was leaving behind him, knowing that none of it mattered at all.

It was funny, he thought, how your world could fall

apart like this. Your nice, normal world, with a pretty wife and a house in Brooklyn and your army discharge papers in your pocket, becoming nothing but puppetry and illusion. Soap-bubbles.

He stepped out of the subway station at Madison and 42nd. Traffic whizzed by; busy people were heading home for dinner. The streets were jammed.

Marsh cupped his hands and yelled, "Anyone who can hear this, *stop!* I order you! Me!"

Within a radius of twenty feet or so, all life stopped. He was surrounded by a circle of statues, of tree-trunks that had been people.

He walked down 42nd, heading westward, stopping all life as he went. The spectacle of New York's busiest street silent, lifeless, clotted with New Yorkers frozen where they stood, was awesome, almost terrifying.

For what? Why was all this done? he asked. *And am I the only real one?*

Times Square was thronged with people, thousands of them ebbing forward toward the subway kiosks. A barker was huckstering for a sight-seeing tour of the city. With sudden inspiration, Marsh froze him and snatched his

megaphone from his numb hands.

Veins stood out on Marsh's throat as he yelled his command to the thousands in Times Square. And they began to stop; the toys ceased moving.

All except one.

Marsh waited, and a nerve in his cheek began to quiver. A tall, casual-looking man was weaving his way through the clusters of stiffened pedestrians, his face grim, his lips clamped together.

It was Harry Davenport.

Marsh let the megaphone drop and waited for Davenport to approach.

"Look here, Marsh—you can't go about doing this! You're wrecking the whole show! I've followed you up all the way from Brooklyn. Do you have any idea how much confusion you've caused?"

"It's your fault," Marsh said accusingly. "If you hadn't kept that mouth of yours shut—"

"Oh, come now."

"Don't give me that! If you had shut up, I wouldn't ever have found out about this! The world was a nice place. I liked it. And now look what you've done!"

"Couldn't you always turn everyone back on again,

Marsh? It's no harder than turning them off."

Marsh scowled unhappily. "And could I live with them any more, knowing they were all just puppets? No, Davenport. I'll turn the whole damned puppet show off." He waved his arms, encompassing all of Times Square. "The whole world will be just as frozen and as dead as Times Square. Dammit, this didn't have to happen."

Davenport said, "You made it happen. You didn't have to take me seriously."

"Well, I did. And I'll turn *you* off too. Go on—freeze!"

Marsh waited. But Davenport did not freeze. He continued to frown grimly, to breathe, to blink his eyes.

"It didn't work," Marsh said. "You're the first one it hasn't worked on. That means—you must be real, too! So I have to share the world with you? How many of us are there, Davenport?"

The tall man shook his head sadly. "Only about a dozen, Marsh. We found out

about . . . things, and we created things for our own amusement. We didn't expect you to become so violent when you found out the truth. But your destructiveness has been, in its way, amusing. We tire of it, though."

"So what? What can you do to stop me?"

"A great deal." Davenport looked very sad. "There are different levels of realness, Marsh. The lowest you see around you—people with no life of their own, who can be turned on and off at will. Then there are those who are truly real. And then a third kind, intermediate, whom we create for special diversion. Such as you. But you've overdone your job. We can't have you upsetting everything."

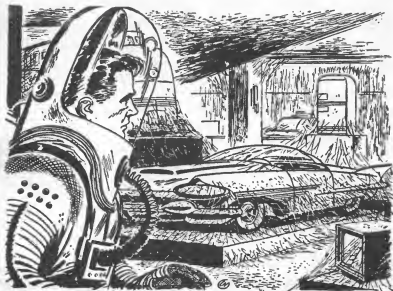
"Me? You're crazy!" Marsh burst out. "I'm just as real as you are, and—"

He never finished the sentence. Shrugging his shoulders sadly, Davenport spoke the words that would turn Marsh off.

THE END

Vault of the Ages

They are sending you into the future to look around. Everything is fine until you come to the times when humanity is going the way of the buffalo and the dodo. Does this worry you? Don't let it. Just write your report and come back or you'll find yourself playing nursemaid and baby-sitter to the last man on earth.



WHEN I agreed to pilot the first time-machine to the future, I expected it to be a quick trip. My instructions were, simply, to look around,

see what the world of Ten Million A D. was like, and return.

Return! What a sweet word! I often dream of re-

turning to the bustling, crowded world of 2075 I left behind—but here is where I belong, and here is where I must stay.

The time-machine, the first of its kind, seemed to work pretty well after some tests with rabbits and such, and so it was decided to hire a test pilot—me—and see what would happen. I remember the ring of taut, anxious faces that surrounded me in the lab that day as I climbed up the pedestal, threw open the heavy copper door, and got in.

They were all excited. You would have thought they were the ones risking their necks, not me. But that's the way it always is. *They* were worried about the success or failure of their time-travel project; I had nothing to lose but my neck.

So after the proper speeches and impressive-sounding explanations to the press, I was told I could leave. The Big Moment had come. I clanged shut the door, flipped the switch as instructed, and let the cybernetic governors take over control of the time-vessel. I only half believed the thing would work, and I didn't much care. My pay was the same either way.

There was a low singing hum, and I saw the bearded

face of Professor van Brod, who was watching me through the port, melt and swirl as the time-vessel picked up momentum, and then I peered through the port and saw that not only the Professor but also everyone else and the whole laboratory had vanished. I was alone, in the grey nothingness of the space-time continuum.

I looked at my watch. Ten after two. I was scheduled to spend a few hours in the future, and then return to 1975 at precisely quarter-past-two the same day. To the onlookers, only five minutes would have passed, no matter how much time I spent in the future.

I sat back comfortably and waited.

After a while, I got bored watching the grey blankness go whizzing by. The big dial in the front told me that only about three million years had elapsed, and thus I hadn't even reached the halfway point in my journey.

I began to wander around the ship. It was fairly spacious, and well-furnished. There was a goodly library of senso-tapes, and a projector; also a healthy stock of synthetic food concentrates, and a drug closet that included a

considerable supply of rejuvenol, the new miracle rejuvenating drug.

Puzzled, I surveyed the treasure-trove for several minutes, wondering why in blazes a ship expected to be gone for part of a day at most would be stocked with all this stuff.

Then the answer occurred to me, and it didn't make me very happy when I'd figured it out.

They were making sure that I'd be well provided for—in case the ship got stuck somewhere.

This was a trial run. They weren't at all sure the time-vessel was going to function as they expected, and they intended to make things as cozy as possible for their poor test pilot in case he met with some unforeseen fate in the far future, such as discovering that the time-machine went only in one direction—forward.

Professor van Brod had assured me that the journey in both directions would be as safe as a subway ride—but obviously some of the others in the project had their doubts about it, in view of the things that had been packed on board for my benefit.

I stared angrily out at the greyness for a few minutes, annoyed at myself for letting

them mislead me, before it occurred to me that I was being foolish; as a professional test pilot, I'd faced worse dangers than this before, and had somehow always come out mostly in one piece. It was my job. I had no right to kick about possible danger.

I must have dozed off for a while, because the next thing I knew there was a fairly solid *bump!* as the ship settled to the ground. A gong went off, and when I looked up I saw the dial registering Ten Million. End of journey.

I dashed to the porthole and looked out. Well, the ship hadn't been a failure, at least. There was no way of telling where — when — I actually was, but it was definite that the ship had gone *somewhere*. I wasn't in the laboratory any more, for sure.

Outside, everything was perfectly flat and bleak. I saw long vistas of brown, grassless plains, with no trace of mountains; evidently the ceaseless work of the wind had worn away the hills.

Up above was the sun, looking pretty much like the sun I remembered. It seemed a little dimmer, and a little redder, but not very much so.

I flattened my nose against the pane, trying to see around

the corner of the ship. But as far as I could see, there was just this—emptiness.

I checked my guns to see if they were loaded—they were—and, thus armed against any terror the future might hold, I started to heave open the outside door. A minute later, I emerged and dropped lightly to the ground, ten million years ahead.

The air was clean and sweet, with a pleasant cold tang in it. I didn't know what month I'd landed in, of course, but it seemed like late-autumn weather, when the air has that sharp, fresh quality of oncoming winter.

I started to walk. Empty, everywhere—just the endless, unvegetated plain. It was a worn-out planet, or else a very young one. The wild thought struck me that perhaps I'd gone backwards, not forwards, in time. Perhaps, I thought, I had plunged into the misty past, back before the beginning of life.

Then I walked around the ship, and what I saw convinced me that I'd gone in the right direction.

It was a giant building, leaping up from the bare plain like a great gleaming tooth clawing at the sky. All around it was the desolate wasteland,

and the lone skyscraper seemed incredibly incongruous in this vast prairie.

Hesitantly, I moved toward it. It was streamlined and glowing with a radiant warmth that had no particular visible source, and it was windowless. I crossed the half-mile that separated it from my time-vessel quickly, listening to the *thud-thud* of my footsteps as they broke the eternal silence of this distant era.

When I approached, I saw, carved over the door in letters ten feet high, the inscription: *The Vault of the Ages*. I drew forth my camera and photographed it, for use as evidence when I returned.

Then I headed for the doors, and they swung open as I came close to them. I stepped in, and the sound of my foot crossing the threshold was doubled and redoubled fantastically by the echoes, which went running wildly up to the far-off end of the corridor.

I was in a museum—the final museum of mankind.

I wandered through the brightly-lit, dustless, silent hallways for hours, forgetting how the time was passing. It made no difference, anyway; the time-machine was set to return me to a point in time

exactly five minutes after my departure, no matter how much time elapsed for me in the future. And what I saw in the Vault of the Ages was too exciting to come away from voluntarily.

It was nothing less than a record of man's accomplishments, from the very beginnings. Near the front entrance I saw incredibly ancient-looking clay tablets, saw time-yellowed bone knives and chopping tools from the unimaginably distant past.

As I moved on, the exhibits kept pace. There was a colorful reproduction (or was it the original?) of the cave drawings from Altamira, and other relics of primitive man; then I saw the implements of civilization, books, money, tools. There was an automobile there, an amazingly well-preserved Model T. An airplane, a V-2 rocket, every example of man's ingenuity.

But the whole of our paltry two thousand-odd years took up just a tiny part of the museum, for there were ten million years to come. I saw an entire spaceship on the third floor; I saw a model of my time-machine. I saw things I did not understand, and other things I don't want to talk about. I wandered on through the endless halls for hours on

end, just barely scratching the surface of what was to be seen. The museum was a repository for every accomplishment of mankind throughout all his long history.

And then, just as I was starting to feel hunger pangs and was on the point of deciding to turn back and return later, I came to a bend in the corridor. I rounded it, and my eyes were struck with a glowing, luminescent radiance emanating from a large metal door.

I moved closer and read the inscription on it:

MAN'S FINEST ACHIEVEMENT

And as I took another hesitant step closer, I broke the photoelectronic beam and the mighty doors swung open.

Welcome, man of the past, a thin, dry voice said. I stared ahead into the inky blackness that enfolded me, struggling to regain the use of my eyes.

Finally I became used to the dark, and I looked around to see who had spoken. And I saw Them.

There were a dozen of them. Tiny, wrinkled, hideously ancient gnomes, sitting in immense chairs. Their chests were rising and falling. slow-

ly, methodically, but that was the only sign of life.

"Who—who are you?" I stammered.

We are all that is left, said the same voice. And now I realized that no voice had spoken, except in my mind. These ancients were communicating telepathically.

"All?" I asked.

There are twelve of us, the voice said. *Six men, six women. We have been here a thousand years, and we will remain a thousand years more. Someday, perhaps, we will die.*

There was a note of longing in that last sentence, of great age yearning for the long-delayed end. I looked at them—the last twelve men and women of Earth, sitting there like so many dried-up prunes, waiting for death. The race that had done so much, that had left the proud memorial that stood alone on the deserted planet—had come to this. Twelve old fossils, waiting to die.

There were twenty when we came here, another telepathic voice said, taking up the story. *Eight of us have been fortunate. Someday death will come for the rest of us, and we will have ended our long wait.*

I stood in the middle of the

darkened room, feeling their presences around me. "Why has this happened? Why are you here—just waiting to die?"

What else is there to do? one of them asked sadly.

We have grown old, said another. *We can have no children. We feel it is time that mankind's strivings reach their end, and the end is long in coming. Some of us have waited ten thousand years.*

Ten thousand years! No wonder they were tired of life!

It was incredible. The last people on Earth, all long past the age of childbirth, sitting in this vast museum in the darkness at the end of time, their own prime exhibits. And nothing could be done.

Nothing?

Yes, something! The thought struck me at once. I looked around at the twelve living corpses.

"Don't go away," I said. "I'll be right back."

The utter inanity of what I'd just said didn't strike me until I was outside the museum and dashing frantically over the plain back to my ship.

I found what I wanted, and hurried back. Rejuvenol—that was the answer! The miracle drug! Perhaps it might not be

too late to reverse time for these last survivors of man's greatness, to turn the clock back and make them young again!

My employers had thoughtfully included the rejuvenol for my use, in case I was unable to return, and wanted to prolong my life. The newly-discovered drug, the wonder drug of the age, relieved the sufferings of old age, brought about a rebirth of vitality and youthful vigor.

But this was a use its manufacturers had never dreamed of. I was bringing new life to a dying planet!

I followed the path through the winding building to the great shining door once again, and burst in.

What are you going to do?

"I'm going to bring you back to life," I said. "This drug—maybe you don't know about it. It dates from the dawn of time, practically—2075 A.D. My era."

What will it do to us?

"It'll make you young again," I said, as I started to prepare the injections. "You can go out and repeople the Earth, and keep the flame of life going."

Why? Why start all over?

I ignored the mournful question. It seemed to me that there was nothing else I could

do but bring these last men and women from their lethargy, give them the restored vitality that would continue the race, as long as the power to do so was in my hands.

I went up to the first of them, fumbled in its robes—these dried-up ancients were so withered I couldn't tell the men from the women—and found the biceps. I plunged the hypodermic in, then hastily sterilized the needle and ran on to the next, and by the time I had injected the twelfth I saw, gratifyingly, that the first one was already beginning to stir from his eon-old position of repose. He was becoming young again.

Why did you do that to us?
one of them asked.

I only smiled and watched as color flooded back into the faded faces. There was no need to explain now; later, when their minds were young again, they would understand what it was to live, and explore, and take chances—the sort of chances that I took myself, when I signed on for the time-machine job.

I watched the change take place before my eyes, as the years rapidly peeled away from them.

Then, suddenly, a vivid, angry thought struck me. *You*

fool! What kind of dose did you give us?

"The normal dose for an elderly adult," I said. "One cubic centimeter!"

Idiot!

"Why, what's wrong?"

What's wrong, you ask? In ten million years, the human race has evolved, the cold voice said, lecturing me painfully. Our organs are more efficient, our bloodstreams more direct.

Had I miscalculated? They seemed to be growing rapidly younger—too rapidly.

Don't you understand? the voice asked. The dose you gave us was calculated on the basis of the needs of your own clumsy, primitive bodies—not ours. You've given us a gigantic overdose!

I was relieved at that. After all, so what if I'd overdosed them? Rejuvenol, up to now, had been used on people in their seventies and eighties, and it seemed only logical that men and women who dated their ages in thousands of years would need a stronger dose to achieve the same effect. So I wasn't worried.

But the outbreak of violent cries of anger continued, coming in chorus from all twelve, and I began to see that I'd done something terribly

wrong. It became more apparent, as the character of the cries changed from roars of anger to high-pitched, wordless whines.

In a couple of hours, the transformation was complete, and I looked at the product of my handiwork: twelve naked, squalling babies!

I was responsible for this, and it was my duty now to help them and care for them.

That was five years ago, and they're growing up into nice little toddlers now. I didn't dare leave them and go back to 2075 for help, out of fear that they'd lock me up and put me away; I couldn't risk that, not with twelve helpless babies to take care of!

So I've stayed here, stranded ten million years in the future, waiting for these kids to grow up. Luckily, the Vault of the Ages had some diapers and such things preserved in its all-embracing collections.

I figure another five years and it'll be safe to leave the kids to rebuild society on their own. And then I'll go back to 2075, and won't they be surprised when I come out of that machine fifteen years older than when I went in!

In the meantime, I'm stuck here—nursemaid and babysitter for the last men on Earth!

THE END

THE BLUE PLAGUE

What would you do if you came home and found your wife missing and discovered she'd gone off into space to understudy a guinea pig? Well, that's just what Dave did—but the doing was rougher than you'd expect.

IT WAS a Wednesday morning, early in September of 1962. I thought it was a perfect early-autumn morning, as I caught a cab and headed for the laboratory. Bright, crisp, clear, with a tang in the air. I didn't know then that an undeclared war was scheduled to begin before nightfall—a war calculated to wipe out all humanity.

I started to find *that* out at lunchtime, when I tried to call my wife.

I dialed, let the phone ring six or seven times. No answer. "Funny," I said.

"What is it?" Joe Harper said. He's in my research group at the electronics lab.

"That my wife doesn't answer. She's always home at noon when I call."

"Maybe the iceman's there," Joe suggested, grinning.

"No—be serious, you idiot. I'm supposed to tell her whether or not the Cooks are coming for dinner tonight, so she can prepare enough meat. She said she'd be around at noontime for my call."

"Then she forgot."

"Uh-uh. Kate doesn't forget things like that—not if it has anything to do with supper. Damn it, now I'll have to keep calling until she comes in."

We were working on a tricky and delicate radar problem, and I knew it would be a nuisance to keep making phone calls and interrupting the work. Annoyed, I dialed again, and held the receiver for eight rings before dropping it.

"Call a neighbor," Joe said. "Relay the message."

"Good idea." I dialed Mrs. Cowan's number. She's our next-door neighbor, and I figured I'd have her ring Kate up on the housephone and pass the word along about supper.

I listened to the phone ring a while, then put it down numbly.

"Hey — you sick?" Joe asked.

"Mrs. Cowan's not home," I said.

"So? Maybe the iceman's busy. Or maybe she and your wife went for a walk."

I shook my head. "Mrs. Cowan's got arthritis. She uses a wheelchair. And she *never* goes out of the house. *Never*. Something's up, Joe. I don't like it."

"Try calling someone else in the house, Dave."

I shook my head. "Just wasting time. If my wife's not home, and Mrs. Cowan's not home, there's a good reason why. I'm going to take a long lunch hour today, Joe."

A perspiring twenty minutes later I pulled up in front of our house, handed the driver a buck, and scrambled out and into the building.

I couldn't wait for the elevator. I sprinted up the four flights of stairs, arriving

winded in front of our apartment door. Even then, I remembered to wipe my feet on the mat. It's funny how little domestic habits stick with you.

I opened the door.

The place looked like Hurricanes Alice, Betty, Charlotte, and Zenobia had been through it.

Drapes were pulled down, chairs were overturned, a lamp had fallen. It looked as if Kate had been dragged bodily out of the apartment.

I picked up the phone, dialed the police, and said, "My wife's been kidnapped." I gave my name and address and hung up. The words seemed to float on the air, strangely unreal and dreamlike—nightmarish.

The air. There was something funny about the air—something fishy, rather. Literally. The odor of fish hung around the apartment.

Kate hates fish. So do I.

I started to investigate the place. The trail of debris started in the kitchen, where she'd been fixing lunch. There was an omelet lying overturned on the floor, and a skillet nearby.

I picked up the skillet. It still had grease in it, and a few fragments of egg. And there was something green and sticky on one side of the

rim. Something like green blood, I thought.

Green blood? What the hell—

They had dragged her out of the kitchen, through the foyer, through the living room, and out the front door. She had tried to grab on to anything and everything as she went. I found myself quivering, shaking all over.

The doorbell rang. In the state I was in, I almost jumped out of my skin.

But it was only the police—three of them.

"I'm Detective Feuerman," the biggest one said. He glanced around the apartment. "Want to tell me all about it?"

I told him all I knew, which wasn't much. As soon as I mentioned Mrs. Cowan, Feuerman sent his two aides to investigate the rest of the floor.

They returned shortly. "We canvassed the whole floor, Chief. There's no one home in any of the apartments along this side of the corridor, and no one on the other side knows anything about anything."

"Okay," Feuerman said. He looked at me. "We'll get right to work. These damned New York apartment houses, where people could be getting sawed in half alive and no one would bother to notice! Can I have

some photos of your wife, Mr. Martin?"

Eventually, they left, promising to find Kate immediately if not sooner. I didn't put much faith in their assurances, but it made me feel better to know someone was *looking*.

I realized I had forgotten to show them the green substance on the side of the skillet. Just as well, I thought. They'd only ignore it.

I moved around the apartment methodically, straightening up some of the mess. When I was through, I called the lab, and informed the switchboard operator I wasn't coming back that afternoon.

Then I slumped down in my big armchair and let the nervous reaction sweep over me.

Kate was gone, just like that. And so, I was willing to bet, were Mrs. Cowan, Mrs. Ludwig, and the rest of the people on this side of the floor. It was as if they had been *collected*.

Collected. Fishy odor in the air. Green stuff on the skillet. *Take it easy, Dave*, I warned myself. *It's only 1962. The spacemen haven't invaded us yet.*

Or have they?

I went to the sideboard and poured a drink with shaky

fingers, wondering if Kate were dead or alive or halfway to Alpha Centauri by now. Detective Feuerman would have a nice job trying to find her if that—

Ease up, Dave. Ease up.

I gulped the drink, and poured another. Then I corked the bottle and put it away. I was loopy enough by now without getting drunk on top of it.

Kate—

Green blood. Fish-smell. And half a floor of people kidnapped.

I decided I needed some fresh air. I locked up the place and went out into that lovely September day. Only it didn't seem so lovely now.

The street seemed sickeningly familiar. Sickeningly, because life went on calmly all around, in the apartment houses that mushroomed up on every side, in the laboratory building across the street, in the park and in the stores. Everywhere but in my house, where the normal flow of life had come to a jarring break-point.

I started to walk, just to be moving, just to be doing something. Down the block, across the street, up again—silly mechanical motions. I wondered if I should return to the apart-

ment and wait there, wait for the phone to ring and Detective Feuerman to say, "We've found your wife and she's okay."

But I didn't want to go back to the apartment we'd lived in together. Not yet. Not just yet. I wanted to walk around, to let the shock drain out of my system, to—

I stopped and looked down at the colored bit of cloth that lay at my feet. It was a strip of green iridescent cloth about three feet long or so, and a couple of inches wide: the belt from some woman's housecoat, no doubt.

With trembling hands I picked it up and examined it. It was made of reylon, that new, practically indestructible plastic that went on the market last year. Kate owned a reylon housecoat, in green. I bought it for her birthday, six months ago.

And this was the belt of Kate's housecoat lying here. I looked up, I was in front of a big, closed door, and the sign over the door said, *Northern General Laboratories, Employees Only.*

The lab was new; a year ago, the building had been an abandoned warehouse. No one quite knew what sort of research was carried on inside it. No one cared, in fact.

But suddenly I cared. I knew with all my heart that Kate was inside that building, and I wanted in.

Stuffing the housecoat belt into my pocket, I walked around the building, looking for the front entrance.

There wasn't any. So I went to the employees' entrance, and tried to open the door. No dice. I knocked, and no one heard. It was like trying to storm a fortress.

But there were other ways of getting inside a laboratory, I knew.

I waited a few minutes, glancing at my watch. It was a little after one in the afternoon. Maybe an employee returning late from lunch—

Yes. A man appeared as I stood there, youngish-looking, probably a technician of some kind. He touched a key to the door and it sprang open. I stepped swiftly in behind him, before the door closed.

He turned. "I'm sorry, but—"

Smoothly I said, "I'm the sales representative for Consolidated Labs. I have an appointment with your director. I wonder if you—"

A girl came gliding up to us, wearing a severe one-piece dress without ornament. "I'll handle this," she murmured to

the man who had inadvertently let me in. Turning to me she said, "Yes, please?"

I produced my Lab identification badge. "I'm David Martin of Consolidated Labs. Your director is expecting to see me on a very urgent matter."

I hoped it would work. The place looked busy, what I could see of it: men moving back and forth on mysterious errands, carrying boxes, tubes, apparatus. Further in the background I saw a staircase and a closed door.

"Our director? Very well, Mr. Martin. Come with me."

She moved away, gliding as if her feet were oiled, and led me through a winding passageway and down a long corridor lined with office doors.

"Which floors are used in active research?" I asked. "I'd very much like to look around the place, if regulations permit—"

"In here, please, Mr. Martin," she said, ignoring my hopeful question. She pressed a panel and one of the office doors opened.

I entered. The room was totally bare—not even a desk or a chair in it. Just four empty walls, and no window. I didn't like it.

"Hey! What's the idea of—"

"Our director has no appointments for this afternoon, Mr. Martin. Therefore, you're here for some other purpose. Please don't attempt to escape; you'll find it's quite impossible."

I made a leap for the door, but too late. It slid smoothly closed, and the last thing I saw before it clanged shut was the girl's smiling face.

I pounded on the door. No go. It was sealed without a crack, and there was no handle. I was neatly trapped, in an escape-proof cell.

But one thing was certain: Kate was somewhere else in the building. That fishy odor was all over the place, that repugnant smell I'd first encountered in our apartment.

Only how to find her? How to get out?

A sudden sweetish odor hit my nostrils. I heard a hissing sound coming from above. I looked up.

There was a grille in the room's ceiling, twelve feet above me. A yellowish gas was issuing from that grille, coming hissing out and filling the room.

I coughed. There was no way to reach the grille, no way to prevent the gas from filling my lungs, no way . . .

I remember slumping over,

retching, sucking in breath, thinking, *This is what the gas chamber's like. I'm going to die. I'm going to die.*

But I didn't die.

I woke up, instead—feeling as if I'd been disemboweled, or drawn and quartered and put back together again. I knew I'd been gassed.

I dragged in breath, trying to clear the gas from my lungs, and blinked my eyes. For one dizzy moment I thought I was back in my lab: there were lab benches, tables full of apparatus, lockers, paraphernalia.

But as my mind cleared I saw I was still somewhere in the building—in *their* lab. I was in a cage of some sort, made of a transparent, nearly invisible substance.

"Dave?"

I turned. "Kate!"

She was in the next cage. Her clothing was torn, and her eyes were red from crying. Further down I saw Mrs. Cowan, still in her wheelchair, and two or three of our other neighbors. I was in the end cage, since I was the newest acquisition to the collection.

"How did you get here, Dave?" The walls of the cages didn't seem to inhibit transmission of sound.

"I—came home and found you were gone. Then I went

for a walk. Your belt was in the street outside this building."

"Oh." In whispers, she told me what had happened: how the doorbell had rung, how four young men had forced their way in, trapped her in the kitchen, dragged her away. "I hit one of them with the skillet," she said. "He bled—green."

"I know. I saw it. What is this place, anyway?"

"We've been here almost two hours," Kate said. "I don't know what's going to happen. I'm afraid, Dave! I—don't think they're human!"

"We'll find out." I looked around. A few of the smooth-faced labmen were moving around, with equipment of a strange and incomprehensible sort. My skin grew cold. I was an engineer; I was trained to deal with electronic apparatus. But I didn't recognize any of the gadgets I saw here. They were alien, frightening, bizarre.

Right in the middle of Manhattan, I thought. The aliens have landed and no one even bothered to look.

"What do you think they want with us, Dave?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, honey. I don't know."

But I had seen too many labs not to know. We were

penned in these cages like experimental animals.

We were guinea pigs. Human ones. Lord only knew how they planned to use us.

I counted eight of us, in a row of cages. Waiting. Waiting—for what?

Pressing my finger against the wall of the cage, I noticed an interesting blurring effect—as if my finger were sinking into the wall, to the depth of a couple of molecules. I pushed harder, but no go.

My electronics-engineer mind started clicking. The wall might behave that way if, instead of being a new plastic, it were a force-field of some kind.

And if it were a force-field, there would have to be a generator—

"Attention, please," said a calm, dispassionate voice. I glanced up and saw a smooth-faced young man facing the row of cages.

"That's him," Kate whispered. "One of the ones who came to get me!"

"Doubtless you eight have been wondering why you are here," the young man said. "Since you are about to take part in a most important experiment, I think it's only fair you know what is going to happen."

"Experiment?" Kate repeated.

I nodded coldly. I had guessed as much.

"To begin," the young man said, as coolly as if he were delivering a scientific lecture, "to begin, I should inform you that we of Venus have had this laboratory in operation for some three months now."

Venus!

"I think I should add that this is not our natural form, but a carefully-devised imitation of your bodies. Our real appearance is something quite different."

It all hung together now, the green blood and the fishy odor, the smooth way these people walked, the alienness of the laboratory equipment. But—*why?*

"The basic situation is this: Venus is greatly overcrowded, and we must expand our living area. Earth seems an ideal world for this purpose. But, of course, Earth is inhabited—and so, if we are to colonize here, we must first dispose of those inhabitants."

Just so, I thought. Cool, scientific, emotionless—and utterly evil.

He went on: "In order to do this most efficiently, without causing widespread confusion and possibly touching off a lengthy and costly struggle,

we have established this laboratory as our first beachhead on Earth. For the past three months, we have been experimenting with various organic life extinguishers: virus diseases of one type or another, cancers, and so forth. The aim is to produce a short-lived, quick-acting airborne disease which will wipe out all Earthly life in a period of hours, leaving it free for Venusian colonists and livestock.

"Most of the methods we have devised have been too slow-acting or too easily counteracted. However, you have been brought here today to serve as living test-animals for the method we feel stands the greatest chance of success. Experiments indicate that XV-106 will cause destruction of life within minutes after infection, in the most efficient manner. XV-106 has yet to be tested on human beings, of course, but should it prove successful we intend to circulate it in Earth's atmosphere by nightfall. In less than 24 hours we may control Earth."

Just as simple as all that, I thought. The scientific attitude carried to the utmost: even to the point of delivering a little lecture to the guinea pigs before experimenting on them.

Kate's pale, frightened face turned to me. "Dave—"

"Don't worry, honey. At least . . . at least it'll be quick. They say so."

But it was a pretty feeble attempt at humor. I stared at that smug human mask and wondered what alien horror was behind the youthful, handsome face of the "technician." Then I looked back at Kate. "We'll get out of here," I said. I ran my fingers along the cage wall, feeling the intermolecular penetration. It *had* to be a force-field; there was no other explanation. . . .

"Above each of you, you will notice a globe containing blue vapor. This represents a concentrated solution of XV-106, in a quantity sufficient to extinguish life. We will open these globes by remote control and observe the results."

I saw half a dozen other aliens appear, looking interested and serious. They were carrying notebooks. It was fantastic: they looked like earnest college kids doing a chemistry experiment, not like alien beings going about the job of destroying a world.

"We will now open the first globe."

I looked up. The globe was sitting about two feet above my head, embedded in the top

of the force-field cage. It looked like a bittle blue tomato, but I could see the hinge lines where it would split to release its deadly poison.

I tried to ignore Kate's sobs of fear. I was scared silly myself, but I was trying to stay level-headed, not to give up, not to stop thinking of a way out. . . .

If only they didn't begin with me! If only I had a few minutes more!

"*Look!*" Kate screamed.

I looked.

They had opened the eighth globe, the one furthest from me. There was a woman in that first cage, someone from our building. I never knew her name. I wasn't ever going to get to know it, either.

The blue cloud came spiraling down and dissipated itself in the atmosphere of the cage. I counted five seconds—*thousand-one, thousand-two*. . . .

On *thousand-five* the woman in the cage let out a piercing shriek.

And fell apart.

It was the only way to describe it. Her skin turned gray in one second and sloughed away like so much modelling clay the next second. The devils from Venus knew their biochemistry, all right. A quicker-acting biological poison had never been imagined.

I stared numbly at the pile of bones in Cage Eight. The alien observers were gathered around, clucking approvingly, scribbling notes. The project was a howling success. I compared it with a group of biologists examining white mice they had successfully injected with leprosy, and nodding over their triumph. They felt no guilt—why should they?

And neither did these Venusians.

"We will now open the second globe," the calm voice said.

Globe two hung over the head of a plump woman in her fifties. This time, I didn't look—but I knew from Kate's little gasp what had happened.

I pictured the stuff spreading out in billowing waves through Earth's atmosphere. Within hours, the world would be a charnal-house.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I tried to think, tried to remember that paper I'd read in the electronics journal a couple of months before: *Force-Field Theory and Its Applications*, or something like that. I hadn't read the piece too carefully; force-field work is so new and so experimental that I never expected to be dealing with it.

"The experiment is going quite well. Globe three, now."

I remembered one concept from that article: "*The essential nature of a force-field is such that the projector must be located within the system itself.*"

"Dave, it's horrible! They are killing them one by one . . . and soon it'll be our turn."

"Maybe they won't get to us," I said. "Maybe the experiment is such a success they won't need to test us all."

They were empty, foolish words, and I knew it. But they soothed her and they calmed me for the moment, which was all that mattered. My trained engineer's fingers explored the cage, fumbled over roughness, pried and sought. . . .

"Globe four, now."

We were apparently in globes seven and eight. Unless they didn't intend to proceed right up the row.

"Globe five."

Four of the cages contained only skeletons, now. My blood chilled at the thought of a world exposed to this stuff all at once.

"Globe six."

Kate's cage was next . . . and mine after that. We had only minutes, seconds left.

And I found what I was looking for.

The woman in Cage Six—

SCIENCE FICTION

she was poor Mrs. Cowan—was staring in horror at the cloud of blue gas filtering into her compartment when I went into action.

I leaped high, snared the little globe dangling above my head, and shuddered at the thought of what I held in my hand. Then I stamped down on the generator of the force-field.

It was a tiny knob embedded in the floor—but it had to be within its own field, according to force-field theory, and that was the flaw in the use of force-fields as cages. The aliens hadn't counted on that.

There was a blue flicker in the air and I knew I was free. Kate's cage and mine had shared a wall in common, and for an instant her cage was open before her generator filled in the gap. I reached in and yanked her through.

The aliens were busy observing Mrs. Cowan's last seconds of life, and for three or four seconds they didn't know what was happening. After that, it didn't matter.

"Come on!" I whispered, and dragged Kate after me, nearly pulling her arm out of its socket. We must have set an Olympic record spurting across the floor and into the open elevator that loomed up some thirty feet away.

The aliens saw us, then. One of them shouted and went for his gun. The elevator door began to close.

I was a pretty good pitcher in high school. I hurled that deadly little globe of blue gas to the ground about a foot in front of the nearest alien, and the elevator door closed.

The sound of screaming followed us all the way down.

There was no time for hysterics. We legged it grimly out the door of the lab—it opened easily enough from the inside—and down to the corner candy-store. We didn't look back. I knew that that devil-gas was spreading all through the lab now, filtering into the air system, turning those smug aliens into heaps of bones.

I stuck a dime into the phone-slot with fingers that didn't want to obey, and called police headquarters. I asked for Feuerman.

"We haven't found your wife yet, Mr. Martin, but—"

"Never mind that," I snapped. "I've found her. Listen carefully, Feuerman." I told him what had just taken place, as quickly as I could.

When I was through he said, "Stay right there, Mr. Martin. We'll be right over to see that you're taken care of."

"I'm *not* crazy, Feuerman."

He laughed, and I hung up. Kate produced another dime, and I called the local branch of the FBI. I told them who I was, giving my lab as reference, and went through my story again.

Maybe they thought I was crazy, but they didn't say so. "We'll investigate this right away," Mr. Martin. "Give us that address again, please."

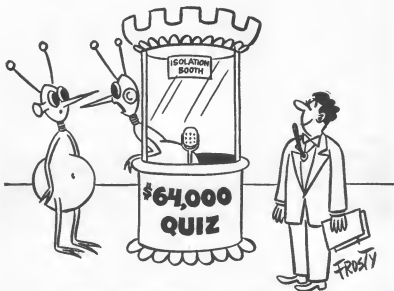
They investigated, all right. I don't know how they did it, because I wasn't there, but they got inside the lab, wear-

ing diving suits, and reported there wasn't a sign of life in there. Just skeletons. Strange ones.

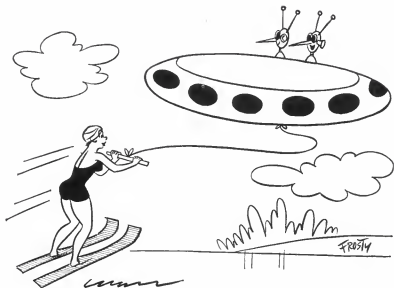
Down at our labs these days, we're kept busy with a Government contract. We're designing equipment to be used in interplanetary space-ships.

We figure that Venus is going to want to colonize us again some day—and next time, we may not be so lucky. So we're planning to get there first, and colonize *them*.

THE END



"I had a feeling the authorities would question us sooner or later."



"She wants us to put her in orbit. Says she needs the publicity."



"I've tried everything—maybe it's atmosphere they need."

ALL ROBERT SILVERBERG ISSUE

SCIENCE FICTION GREATS

Big New Collection

- **GUARDIAN OF THE CRYSTAL GATE**
- **LOOK HOMEWARD, SPACEMAN**
- **THE HAPPY UNFORTUNATE**
- **O, CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN**
- **THE LUNATIC PLANET**
- **THE BLUE PLAGUE**
- **HOLE IN THE AIR**
- **CALL ME ZOMBIE**
- **VAULT OF THE AGES**

